

# CASTLE COMPACT COLUMN

## SLIMLINE BRITISH SPEAKERS OFFER SOLID VALUE

The latest speakers from the Yorkshire company are extremely compact floorstanders. Caroline Osborn likes what she hears

CASTLE SPEAKERS HAVE been reviewed a number of times in the pages of *The Gramophone*, with the Richmond 3is and Compact CC3 System being the most recent favourites, but this is the first time I have been able to try a pair for myself. The £550-per-pair Compact Column loudspeakers, which have been developed from the tiny 'bookshelf' models in the CC3 surround system, are not exactly huge: set on their black plinths and adjustable spikes they stand around 87cm tall but are only 14cm wide, so should not dominate too many rooms.

One of the strengths of Castle Acoustics is that, in an effort to maintain quality control, the company makes all of the cabinetry and most of the electronics itself: indeed, it even applies the high-grade real wood veneers in-house, not to mention supplying other prestige speaker manufacturers with cabinets. In an age where many speaker companies buy in boxes from firms more used to making furniture, that's as commendable as it is unusual. There are eight veneers to choose from and Castle will also consider making custom finishes if required – another benefit of doing everything in-house.

A lot of work has gone in to these speakers to get the highest signal-to-noise ratio, an unusual concept in speaker design but one the company describes in terms of the signal being the required sound, and the noise that generated by the cabinet itself as a result of back pressure from the drive units. Internal bracing top and bottom is angled to reduce and break up standing waves; together with heavy damping using bituminous pads, this helps dramatically increase that signal-to-noise ratio.

The pair of 11cm woven glass fibre mid/bass drivers in each speaker are described as being 'Klippel balanced and optimised', Klippel specialising in the measurement of loudspeakers and drive units to guide designers as to the best compromises to make. The high-frequency unit is a 20mm ventilated coated fabric dome with a Neodymium magnet, while the cabinet is front-ported to improve the bass response. Single-wired terminals feeding a high-quality crossover complete the package.

The speakers have been designed to combine with the other Compact models in surround systems – where they would usually be employed on the front left/right channels – or as stand-alone buys for stereo use. It was in the latter role that I decided to consider them – and I'm glad I did.

### Performance

Running in the Columns took only a couple of days of tone sweeps and leaving the radio switched on and playing, as the speakers had been used before I came to them, leaving only the effects of a few days in transit in a cold warehouse and in various vans and cars to be reversed. Positioning was also simple: I was advised that around 0.3m from the rear wall would do the trick, and this turned out to be pretty well spot-on, while a slight toe-in gave a deliciously sharp focus to the stereo image.

The bass extension quoted, down to around 50hz, is claimed to be on the conservative side, and while the low-end weight is no match for that of my usual PMC FB1+

speakers – selling for almost three times as much – the Castles soon showed they could deliver low-end tunefulness and agility with only a slight lack of ultimate extension. On the end of the Musical Fidelity A5 CD player and X-150 integrated amp, the speakers delivered the solo voice with a piano accompaniment of Bryn Terfel's 'Silent Noon' disc with excellent presence and feel, Malcolm Martineau's piano and the bass-baritone voice having a realism way beyond what I would expect from most speakers at this level. In *The Foggy, Foggy Dew*, one of Britten's folksong arrangements, the humour of both the voice and the playing is revealed by the Castles in a manner guaranteed to make the listener smile.

Moving to orchestral music, in the form of the recent recording of Mahler's Sixth Symphony with Abbado conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, the Castles' versatility was clear, as was their ability with the scale of the orchestra. Transparency and fluidity are the keynotes here, the slow movement with its lyrical and romantic themes sounding succulent and seductive: while the speakers have that big feel, they can also deliver a refreshing intimacy. This is a live recording, and the Castles deliver it with palpable space and air, right through to that magical moment when the music stops and for a moment you hear the hall itself.

The ideal speaker 'disappears' – once set up it doesn't draw attention to itself but rather just lets the music through. The Compact Columns definitely come into that category, being modest in size and not too expensive as well as offering good value for money and the ability to fit in most homes. But the single thing that puts them into the 'must listen' class is the sound: fast and crisp without excessive zing and brightness; not at all laid back (sometimes a euphemism for dull), and simply able to drop into the background and get out of the way of the music. These are special loudspeakers for the money. ●

### Castle Compact Column Loudspeakers

**Type** Two-way floorstanding speakers

**Price** £550

**Drive units** 20mm soft dome

Neodymium magnet tweeter, 2x110mm

Klippel® bass/mid

**Frequency Response** 50Hz-40 kHz

**Nominal impedance** 6 ohms

**Power handling** 15 – 100 watts

**System type** Reflex enclosure

**Dimensions** (HxWxD) 87.5x14x19cm

**Made by** Castle Acoustics Ltd, Skipton,

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The Castle Compact Columns photograph bigger than they are: just 14cm wide, these are truly room-friendly loudspeakers, not to mention excellent value, being capable of a truly thrilling presentation

