Klipsch Heresy III Loudspeakers

The legendary Paul Klipsch was one of the pioneers of Horn loudspeakers. His original Klipschorn dates back to the 1940s, and (with updates) remains in production to the present day. Any speaker still being made after more than half a century has to have something going for it.

The Heresy model dates from 1957, and was originally built as a centre speaker for stereo users of the Klipschorn. These require corner placement, which led to the enclosures being too far apart in some rooms. The Heresy was intended to cure the weak centre image ‘hole in the middle’ effect.

But, enthusiasts soon started using Heresy speakers on their own – indeed, I believe it’s the company’s all time best-seller. A compact three-way floorstanding design some 54cm (21ins) tall and 34cm (13.25ins) deep, offering high sensitivity of around 99dB for 1W, the Heresy III is an improved version of the original design.

For the company’s 60th anniversary in 2006, the entire Heritage range was modified and brought up to date. In the case of the Heresy III, updates include bi-wiring, a titanium dome horn-loaded midrange, and compression-driver tweeter.

The bass unit - a healthy 12in in diameter with 4in voice coil - is not horn-loaded, however. So low frequency output is somewhat limited. Unfortunately, horn loading, high efficiency, and deep bass are not compatible with small size.

Paul – this is Heresy!

If you want extended bass and efficiency, a large cabinet is unavoidable. The Heresy is a deliberate compromise. Apparently, someone heard an early prototype and accused Klipsch of producing a speaker that went against all his principles - ‘Heresy’ no less. Paul Klipsch liked that, and the name stuck!

My initial encounter with the Heresy III came courtesy of a close friend who’d bought a pair to partner his Shanling MC-30 – that’s the gorgeous tube-based CD/Tuner/Amplifier ‘music centre’. The MC-30 is a great little unit, but – with a miniscule 3W output – somewhat limited in terms of power.

However, when partnered with sensitive loudspeakers like Heresy IIs, even a measly 3W is much less of a limitation than you might think. It’s more or less akin to having loudspeakers of 84dB sensitivity partnered with a 100W amplifier. So, while there isn’t power to squander, you’ve sufficient for most situations.

Shock and Awe.

Listening to the MC-30/Heresy III system, I was shocked and surprised by the sound – its immediacy and presence; its remarkable sense of scale. The system created a big, engaging, and above all involving sound that was very exciting. The music seemed to jump from the speakers, unrestrained.

It filled the room easily and effortlessly, and the little MC-30 – despite its 3W output – did not seem to be struggling. On the contrary; the sound was surprisingly effortless.
and open, with that unique immediacy you only get with Horns. I felt I wanted to hear these speakers at home – and even, perhaps, do a review.

Over the past ten years (or more), I haven’t reviewed many loudspeakers. There are several reasons why, not the least of which is – space (ie lack of). For the last twenty years or so I’ve lived with a pair of Impulse H1 horns. Being large, heavy, and not easily moved, the H1’s have made it tricky for me to accommodate other speakers.

But there are other reasons; once you get used to the effortless ease and room-filling presence produced by large horns, it can be very difficult to go back to smaller more conventional (non horn) designs. Such speakers may have many good qualities, but you’re acutely aware of what’s lacking. Once you get a taste for horns you’re hooked.

Deadline.
With no magazine deadline, matters proceeded at their own pace. Mindful of their restricted bass output, I fancied partnering the Heresy IIIIs with a Klipsch active sub woofer. I got the speakers in June 2009, and expected the sub to follow a week or so later. But delays meant the sub did not arrive until mid September.

Actually, this was a good thing. It forced me to listen to the Heresy IIIIs solo for an extended period – longer than I probably would have done had the sub been around. First impressions were very positive – I liked the Heresy III’s presence and detail very much. They sounded crisp, immediate, and engaging – lively and energetic.

On the debit side, I noted an absence of tonal richness and weight. The sound lacked the sort of warmth and fullness I take for granted from the H1s. At least that’s how it struck me at first. But, curiously, the more I listened, the less this seemed to matter. After a couple of weeks, the lack of bass/tonal warmth hardly registered…

Quality vs Quantity
Actually, there’s nothing massively wrong with the quality of the Heresy III’s bass – it’s more a question of quantity. The speaker offers well-behaved low frequency performance, and sounds clean. It’s just that the bottom end is a bit meagre when contrasted with the sparkling energy and presence of the mid range and top.

The Heresy III produces a forward immediate sort of sound; crisp, sharp, and very tactile - it doesn’t hold back. I found this took a little getting used to. Driven by my regular Musical Fidelity kW750 ‘muscle amp’, the sound initially seemed almost a bit too sharp and up-front – albeit quite exciting.

Switching over to a Shanling MC-30 resulted in a smoother more relaxed sound. Being a transformer-coupled tube amp, the Shanling sounded less ‘in your face’. Its’ inherent refined sweetness reigned things back a bit, making the Heresy III’s ‘brightness’ and lack of tonal richness less of an issue.

The Heresy III is excellent on most types of music, but it’s particularly adept at reproducing instruments with fast transients – percussion for example. It creates a remarkably ‘big’ sound for what is a relatively small enclosure, producing room filling presence and dynamics without needing to be played loud.
**Vocal Nirvana.**
I found it especially good on classical vocal music – whether a solo singer, operatic, or massed chorus. It proved able to delineate each vocal strand in a (say) a Monteverdi *Madrigal*, while allowing separate voices to sing out with great individuality and presence. You could hear every *word*; every *breath*; every *tonal nuance*.

Although the **Heresy III** has a somewhat forward tonal balance, it sounded surprisingly *natural* on voice. Choral music exhibited the sort of power and presence you hear live – the sound confidently projects out into the room and comes over to greet you, rather than seeming to stay ‘behind’ the speakers.

At the same time, voices sounded free of obvious coloration. There is perhaps a slight emphasis in the *presence* region (3-5k), but spend time with the speakers and this is hardly noticeable. Indeed, once you get used to **Heresy III**, conventional speakers sound ‘wrong’ – small and recessed, with voices and instruments *too far away*.

The **Heresy III** achieves its ‘presence’ by virtue of horn-loaded mid and top drivers. In particular, the mid-range horn has an extended throat some 10ins or more deep, with a mouth measuring 9x3ins. The tweeter mouth is 4x2ins. This improves coupling to the air, creating the detail, attack, and efficiency horns are renowned for.

**Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Sub.**
Eventually, a **Klipsch RW-10d** sub arrived. This is a medium/small sized active unit offering bass down to about 24Hz (-3dB point is 28Hz). It’s easy to install and offers adjustable volume level, frequency turnover, and phase to help you get the sub perfectly integrated with your main speakers.

It’s suitable for use with hi-fi or a/v systems, and has a ‘Flat’ EQ setting, plus one called ‘Depth’ and another called ‘Punch’. The former boosts the response at about 30Hz, while the latter shifts the boost to about 60Hz to give the upper bass a bit more ‘kick’. All settings are made via press buttons on the top of the unit.

The **Heresy III**’s lack of deep bass is actually an advantage when partnered with a sub. It means the sub can handle the low frequencies without too much overlap between it and the main loudspeakers. Adding the **RW-10d** sub took the **Heresy III** to a new level – it transformed the sound, as I hoped it would.

I immediately noticed increased richness and weight. There was greater warmth that enhanced tonal colour and bloom. At the same time, the high frequencies seemed more spacious and airy, while the soundstage had greater depth and a more holographic dimensionality.

**Woompf, Bloompf – and other satisfying noises.**
Heavy bass drum thwacks now had an impressive weight and power that hadn’t been there before. You heard a delicious subterranean ‘woompf’ that came and went, without adversely influencing the overall clarity of the sound. The air seemed to move with effortless ease, without affecting the midrange and top.

Adjusting the sub for correct turnover frequency and volume is important, but not hyper-critical. A common ‘mistake’ is to have the sub a bit too loud at first. I settled
on a turnover frequency of about 75Hz and set the eq to Flat, adjusting the volume level using a pop music track with a strong clear bass guitar line.

As subs go, the RW-10d is fairly modest. Those able to spend more could buy something that goes down quite a bit deeper. But even the little RW-10d produces sufficient Hz down to the low 20s. Adding a second sub is a further option – a move that will enhance low frequency breadth and dimensionality.

Adding the sub definitely improved the bass/treble balance. The trouble with a speaker like the Heresy III is – its’ mid and top are SO tactile and immediate, it needs similar qualities lower down to achieve equilibrium. I’m not saying Heresy IIIIs can’t be used on their own – they can. But adding a sub helps equalise things.

**Big sound – Small price.**
The Heresy III/RW-10d combination is very appealing because it gives you many of the benefits of large full-range horns (like the Klipsch La Scala and K-Horn) without the massive price tag and huge size. Moreover, a sub-woofer (or two) can always be added later – you don’t have to buy it there and then.

Another major benefit of the Heresy III is the way its high efficiency makes amplifier power a non-issue; it pretty much tears up the rule book as to what you can and can’t use. Normally, you’d never partner something reasonably priced like the Shanling MC-30 with speakers costing as much as the Heresy III or the Klipsch La Scala.

But with sensitivity close to 100dB, this option becomes distinctly viable – output power is no longer a deciding issue – though amplifier quality needs to be high. In this context, the sound of the MC-30 – smooth relaxed and refined - suits the crisp immediate tonal balance of the Heresy III perfectly. It’s a symbiotic match.

**Power does not corrupt.**
I also used the Heresy III and RW-10d combination with a high powered solid-state Bryston pre/power amp, and my own tube/transistor hybrid Musical Fidelity amps.

Because of its high sensitivity, the Heresy III does not place excessive demands on the driving abilities of amplifiers that partner it. At the same time, its’ sharp focus and crisp detailed sound make it a very revealing transducer. It’s a contradictory mix – in some ways easy-going, in other respects very revealing.

It’s the same with recordings. Heresy IIIIs are highly revealing of tiny details that other speakers mask, yet (paradoxically) it isn’t a pernickety speaker that exaggerates or emphasises flaws. For the most part, it plays to the strengths of each recording – it is revealing of faults but doesn’t make matters worse by emasculating the sound.

Recordings that seem cramped or muddy on ordinary loudspeakers, sound clear and full-bodied on Heresy IIIIs. For all their brightness and immediacy, Heresy IIIIs rarely sound coarse or grainy. Being horns, the midband is solid and firm, minimising the limitations of recordings with poor frequency range and limited dynamics.
Older recordings.
As a result, they’re very good with old recordings. Perhaps surprisingly, they don’t emphasise things like tape hiss. You might expect a bright/forward speaker like the Heresy III to highlight background noise, but instead the music seems to be projected over any noise that might be present, making it subjectively less apparent.

I sampled some of Sir Adrian Boult’s LPO Vaughan Williams symphonies cycle – his original ‘50s mono set on Decca – and was gratified to hear some of the earlier technically less-good recordings (of the London and Pastoral symphonies, for example) sounding much more solid and full than is usually the case.

Modern hi-fi systems can make some ‘50s mono recordings (and those taken from 78rpm shellac discs) sound cramped and ‘small’, but – by virtue of its focused detailed mid-band - the Heresy III invariably produces a clear strongly-profiled sound that has colour, depth, and surprisingly dimensionality.

The Heresy III is great on natural simply-miked recordings that aim to capture the music without exaggeration. With conventional loudspeakers, such recordings can sound a bit plain and underwhelming. But Heresy IIIIs reveal lots of detail, and the speaker’s sheer presence ensures the sound is not emasculated.

They’re perhaps not so good on heavily compressed rock/pop, where the already ‘loud’ nature of the recording is made to seem even louder by the forwardness and presence of the speakers. The Heresy IIIIs inherent forcefulness is not perhaps ideal for such material – though you could, of course, argue it enhances the impact!

Small Rooms.
Heresy IIIIs are actually neat floorstanders, intended to sit on small plinth-like risers that tilt the front of the speaker back slightly. It would also be possible to use the speakers on small stands that lift them clear of the floor – or even wall shelves. This being the case, they might appeal to those listening in small rooms.

But while these speakers should perform well in a limited space, I fear their exceptional immediacy may prove a bit over-powering if heard too close-up. Like most Horns, the Heresy III benefits from a degree of distance between loudspeaker and listener. So, try not to sit too close – give the speakers space to breathe.

I myself sat about 12-15 feet back (3.6 to 4.5m) – sufficient distance to give the sound a chance to blend and integrate better. Horns tend to be at their best in medium/large rooms, and the Heresy III is no exception. You get a more holographic ‘out of the boxes’ kind of 3D soundstage as you move further back.

Old shoes.
My old Impulse H1s are the sonic equivalent of a well-worn pair of shoes. I’ve had them for so long (20 years!), I hardly notice them any more. The Heresy III/RW-10d combination gave my H1s a good run for their money. Indeed, in some respects, (presence, immediacy) the Klipsch combination actually sounded better.

The H1s were superior in terms of a certain relaxed ease and integration; its horn-loaded bass has a rich voluminous quality that the sub (for all its power and weight)
did not quite equal. The H1s were better at conveying things like atmosphere and spatial depth in recordings – in contrast to the tactile brilliance offered by Klipsch.

**Up-Front and Personal.**
Of course, everything depends on the sort of sound you like. With Heresy IIIs, you’re effectively sat closer to the musicians. The H1 is akin to moving back 10 or 15 rows. Both speakers sounded very convincing, albeit different. The Klipsch is exceptionally involving - very good at recreating the excitement and drama of a live music event.

It has something of the electric immediacy you experience when you hear music played live. It really engages you – involves you in the action. It’s not, perhaps, a speaker for background listening, though the sound proved surprisingly easy to ‘talk over’, even when loud. It’s forceful and dynamic, but not brash or hectoring.

Anyway, while I’m not quite ready to chop up my H1’s for firewood, the Heresy III/RW-10d combination definitely highlighted areas where my regular speakers could do better – showed me aspects of my own sound that might be improved. As a result of experiencing what Heresy IIIs can do, I made a few changes to my home system.

**Value.**
Even the fact that comparisons were invited is in itself remarkable – my MF amp on its own retailed for double what this systems costs. When you take the combined price of the speakers and sub, plus the fact that something like a Shanling MC-30 can be used, a pair of Klipsch Heresy IIIs and RW-10d sub is a real high-end bargain.

Partner a pair of Heresy IIIs with an MC-30 and a Klipsch Sub, and you’ve an amazing system for just under £3k; a combination that punches well above its weight. It’s a system you might have to spend £6k (or more!) just to equal. So, definitely try to hear this combination before you spend £2k - 3k on a set of speakers.

ENDs

**Klipsch and Shanling** equipment supplied by **Real Hi-Fi**

**Web site** www.realhi-fi.com  e-mail info@realhi-fi.com

Phone 01257 473175