



<i>Retail starting prices in the Netherlands (per pair, incl. 21% VAT):</i>
<i>Graham Audio LS5/9 – 4.200 euro</i>
<i>Graham Audio LS5/9f – 4.600 euro</i>
<i>Graham Audio LS5/8 – 8.700 euro</i>
<i>Audio Origami PU7 gimbal bearing tonearm: 2.900 euro</i>

Description

Graham Audio loudspeakers are built in the UK under the supervision of Derek Hughes. Starting at Spendor, Derek updated the designs of the LS3/5A and the LS3/6 for Stirling Broadcast. In recent years, he has been working with Graham Audio, where he was responsible for reviving the LS3/5A, LS5/8, and LS5/9. All the Graham speakers are designed according to the thin wall construction method using birch plywood and many of them are manufactured and tested in accordance with BBC specifications.

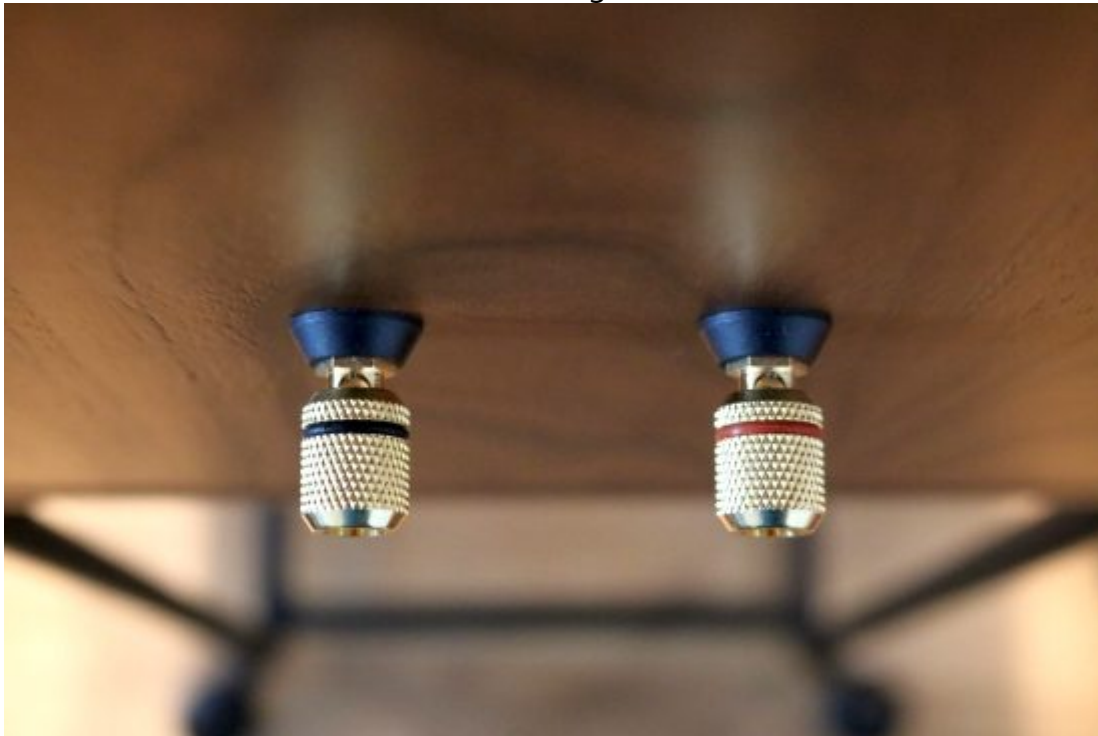
The speakers offer convenient adjustments for treble output. With the BBC-derived monitors, this is done with solder clips and with the LS5/9f, this can be done at the flick of a switch.





The LS5/9 monitors are manufactured under license from the BBC while LS5/9f floor standers are based on the same design but with liberties taken in some aspects. Most obviously, their cabinets deviate from the typical BBC fashion by having the screwed-in

panels on the rear sides rather than on the front. The BBC never developed floor-standing models and I'm not sure what this change does to the sound but, in my opinion, it certainly makes them look much prettier. At 89dB (2.83V, 1m) versus 87dB, the floor-standing model is 2dB's more sensitive than the monitor model. Their larger cabinets also result in an extended frequency response of 40Hz to 20kHz, ± 2 dB whereas the stound-mount models are rated at 50Hz to 16kHz, ± 3 dB. In both cases, a 200mm Diaphnatone polypropylene woofer and a 34mm Audax HD13D34H tweeter are employed. The recommended amplifier power is 50-200 watts and during my listening tests, it was indeed confirmed that the speakers sound best when driven by a healthy dose of power. The LS5/8, finally, are also made under BBC licensing and may appear to be of a similar size in photos but at 76cm by 46cm by 40cm their cabinets are actually considerably larger. These may be *monitor* designs but really, they are larger than some floor-standing designs. Designed in conjunction with Derek Hughes and Volt Loudspeakers to sustain higher sound pressure levels, the LS5/8's feature a huge 12-inch bass driver along with the same 34mm Audax tweeter that is used in the LS5/9 and LS5/9f. The LS5/8 was originally conceived as an active design, but the new passive crossover reportedly improves on the resolution and imaging of the original design while still conforming to the demanding BBC license. According to the manufacturer, the LS5/8's design retains the same balance and midrange clarity of the LS5/9 while offering an extended bass response and greater authority at a high level in larger rooms. As I would find out later, the speakers do indeed sound extremely similar, except in the bass, where the LS5/8 monitor actually sounds more like the LS5/9f floor-standing model.



The notched connectors offer only a very small contact area when using Spades. It works well enough, but for a better and more reliable connection with a wide range of spades, I had preferred a larger flat surface area. The manufacturer commented that they use bananas exclusively.



System context

The initial listening was done with the resident [Antipodes CX](#) music server, [CH Precision C1](#) DAC and [CH Precision A1.5](#) amp and later with the Lejonklou system still using the C1 DAC as well as a Linn LP12 turntable with the Lejonklou Slipsik phono stage that were both kindly provided by Marco Oudheusden of [Hexagon Audio](#) because my Origin Live turntable for away for an upgrade.



Besides Graham Audio and Lejonklou, Hexagon Audio also has turntable arms in its portfolio which leads to this LP12 being outfitted with an Audio Origami PU7 gimbal bearing tonearm. The interesting thing is that this particular LP12 sounds entirely different than the [LP12 that I reviewed years ago](#): smooth, warm, & relaxed instead of thin and forward. The player is pretty much the same version and the exact same cartridge was used so go figure how much of an influence the arm has!

Finally, the Graham Audio speakers were also listened to using the very powerful [Bryston 4B and 14B Cubed](#) amps and the [Electrocompaniet AW600 Nemo](#) mono monsters. The speaker cables used are primarily the [Jorma Trinity](#) but the Lejonklou-modified Linn K400 cable and the Kimber 8TC were also tried. For comparison, I used [Kroma Audio Carmen](#), [Martin Logan ESL15A](#), and [Paradigm Persona B](#) loudspeakers.



Listening

Going from the very clean and neutral [Paradigm Persona B's](#) to the Graham Audio LS5/9's is a bit like going from a sports car to a limousine. Most notably, the LS5/9's are more relaxed and considerably warmer. The LS5/9's presentation is also big and lush. Centrally-placed instruments and vocals are quite distinctly focused but otherwise, the imaging within the soundstage is not incredibly specific. Nevertheless, the stereo panned sounds Hoover effortlessly and freely around the speakers and a manner that is reminiscent of the way that full range Apogee magnetostatic speakers handle imaging.



Another aspect that is reminiscent of those Apogees is the LS5/9's bass performance. Even-handed, deep and lush, it lacks tightness and punch, not only when compared to the Persona's but also when compared to many other recent speakers. This may prove a dividing factor for some people but it really also is a matter of personal taste, especially since this kind of behavior in the bass does match the speakers' behavior in the midrange and treble perfectly. Speaking of which: upon first glance, the tweeters do not seem to be anything special but they behave absolutely non-intrusively. Very well-behaved, well-resolved but never edgy or forward. I don't hear the same amount of resolution as with ribbons or electrostatics but the treble behavior is highly refined, sweet and forgiving, and always gentle. I suspect that with this aspect alone the speakers will already win many hearts.

PASSIVE SPEAKERS REVIEWS

Graham Audio LS5/9, LS5/9f, and LS5/8 – part 2



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Warm, voluptuous, and inviting, they have the sort of sound that one can bathe in. Compared to ribbon speakers, electrostatics or very transparent dynamic speakers such as the Paradigms, there is a significant amount of warmth/richness/coloration in their delivery but that is expected and even intentional.

The whole idea behind having thin walls is that their compliance moves resonances away from the critical midrange and into the lower regions where it does less harm. I guess this does make the bass and lower midrange sound warmer and richer than they should be but this also further adds to these speakers' undeniable charm. The major upside of this approach is the absolutely fabulous midrange. Vocals sound incredibly natural and highly convincing and there is a superbly lyrical and immediately emotionally involving quality to the delivery. It's not only that the mid-band is superbly liquid, but it is also highly faithful to the source, much more so than most other cabinet speakers, even if they come across as being more transparent.



Timbrally, the LS5/9's are also incredibly convincing. Not only vocals but also drums and other percussion instruments sound so much like the real thing that it becomes something of a brain-twister trying to rhyme this with their loose bass and overall very warm delivery. Indeed, the convincing aspect is not so much in terms of dynamic impact but definitely in terms of tonality and natural character. Arguably, these speakers are not ideal for hard-rock nor are they best suited for those who prefer a very revealing and analytical delivery, but I would also not label them as slow or thick and they are certainly speedy and dynamic enough to be comfortable with all music styles.



Moving on to the floor-standing LS5/9f's, initially, what stands out is a considerably fuller and deeper bass but also a fuller tonality. And, initially, this makes them come across as less transparent than the LS5/9 monitors. Listening for longer, though, the floor standers quickly grew on me. While tonally fuller than the monitors the floor standers' timbre again strikes me as very natural and, for example with grand piano, even more convincing than with the monitors. Not only is the floor standers' bass deeper and fuller, but it also has more slam and in that aspect, I certainly prefer them over the monitors.



The LS5/9f's retain the smooth and relaxed Graham sound and do not all of a sudden become Wilson-like, but with the floor standers, the bass is definitely more solid. The LS5/9 monitors' bass was already in some ways reminiscent of the Apogee Duetta Signature bass but now, I really am getting actual flashbacks to their voluptuous and fulsome bass. For a cabinet loudspeaker, that truly is something special.



Soundstage-wise, the floor standers retain the big sound of the monitors but, perhaps due to their fuller and deeper sound, they are slightly more visible *sonically*. By that, I mean that the sound is slightly less detached from the cabinets than it is with the monitors. Perhaps this aspect also contributes to the sense of the monitors being slightly more transparent than the floor standers.



Interestingly, I also ran into the LS5/9f's at a recent [HifiLive show](#) in Valencia, Spain, where they sounded utterly fabulous and audio buddy JW even commented that these provided the most involving and most emotional delivery of all system at the entire show. And I have to agree. There was no match for the naturalness and faithfulness in these speakers' midrange. It's just that I am also a bit of a bass-fetishist, especially in terms of tightness and articulation, and so I also admire speakers such as Magicos, YG's, and Gauder. But these are all very expensive. On the more affordable end, I could mention the Paradigm Persona range. However, while seemingly more transparent and definitely cleaner, more linear, and more revealing, the Paradigm Persona B's do not evoke in me the same emotional connection that the Grahams do. And neither do any of the other aforementioned brands, not in the same way, at least. Such is the interesting world of audio. As in life, one simply cannot have everything or every audiophile parameter box ticked.



Above and below: the bass reflex holes are directly open to the speaker's internal air mass, they do not have a tube.



Ultimately, between the LS5/9 monitor and LS5/9f floor stander, it is very much a matter of personal preference. One needs to choose between more bass extension and solidity and fuller tonality on the one hand and more transparency and invisibility on the other hand. If I'm honest, I would be hard-pressed to choose because they're both so very pleasing. The bottom line is that these speakers have more in common than they differ from one another and so, perhaps, one could simply decide based on visual preferences or budget.



Graham Audio LS5/9, LS5/9f, and LS5/8 – part 3



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LS5/8

Not only the LS5/9 and LS5/9f are similar in their presentation. All the Graham Audio speakers have a very similar sound. One could easily combine different models in a surround setup or work with one pair here and another there, without there being a meaningfully different presentation. But, there *are* some differences, of course.



Despite the enormous difference in size, the huge LS5/8 sounds *a lot* like the smaller LS5/9. Treble behavior, timbre, dynamics, that voluptuous and relaxed midrange, as well as the size of the soundstage are all very comparable but there seems to be a difference in terms of focus. With the speakers either in the same positions as the LS5/9 or LS5/9f or repositioned, I could not attain quite the same sharp focus. The biggest difference, however, as can be expected, is in the bass. With its much larger 12" woofers, the LS5/8's reach significantly deeper. The speakers also sound more sonorous but only when playing music that actually engages these low bass notes. And when they do, boy, do these speakers GO! 40hz +/- 3dB may not sound like an exceptional value when talking about large loudspeakers but with all the Graham Audio speakers, the bass seems to go *much* lower than specified. It certainly is a lot fuller than that of most other same-sized speakers. I mean, I already consider the small-ish LS5/9's to sound quite fulsome, so imagine what the LS5/8's can do! Importantly, these speakers' bass heft does not influence the clarity of the midrange nor does it diminish any of the other virtues.



Their cabinets' size really is something to take into account, though, as the LS5/8 even makes the Martin Logan ESL15A's imposing bottoms look comparatively small. The LS5/8 is capable of 10dB more sound pressure than the two smaller models but as it became clear in my listening sessions, those extra dB's really are not required for my domestic purposes. Bass depth and output level aside, I do not personally see the benefit of the LS5/8's over the LS5/9's but I should also note that I do not tend to listen very loudly.



Amplifiers

All the Graham Audio speakers worked extremely well with the very transparent and highly refined CH Precision A1.5 power amp but its elevated price category will mean that few people will likely use this combination. A much more likely pairing would be with Lejonklou Sagatun preamp and Tundra power amps, which are also supplied by Hexagon Audio. This combination works especially well, further enhancing the speaker's inherent relaxed nature and smoothness with impressive levels of fluidity and refinement. While I marveled at the subtlety, however, I did note that even the double Tundra Mono Amps did not really provide the solidity and dynamic impact that I felt was ideal for these speakers. An interesting alternative was provided by Bryston. Many people still think that these amps are only good for PA use but if that was even the case then that was 20 years ago. Their current SST3, or Cubed, series of amps are actually smooth, refined, and extremely musical, in addition to being incredibly powerful. When combined with the Grahams, the resulting delivery is smooth and luscious but also dynamic and powerful, all in equal measures and the Brystons' utter neutrality also paired remarkably well with the colorful Grahams. The 4B has more than enough power already and has a more liquid presentation than its larger brother but the 14B's tighter and more articulate sound is also seductive and it's clear that the Grahams highly appreciated the extra power and grip.



Fed directly by the C1 DAC, I found the Graham speakers to sound tightest, most articulate and most highly resolving. Going direct is certainly *not always* the best solution but eliminating a preamp can have very worthwhile benefits. For instance, with speakers as tight and precise as the Paradigms, leaving out the preamp can lead to a dry and overly controlled sound. Adding the Lejonklou Sagatun to the Graham mix, the sound indeed became smoother and more fluid, and gentler as well, but I felt that the speakers did not really need this. Sweet enough, as the English say:-)



With the big Graham Audio LS5/8's, coming from smooth and refined Lejonklou, the Electrocompaniet AW180's sound more direct and more solid in the midrange and much more sonorous in the bass. More solid and percussive too, but this extra fullness arguably also makes the music sound a little "fatter". Going from the AW180's to the AW600 Nemos with the big Graham's is very similar to going from the Bryston 4B to the 14B: the bass tightens up and the entire presentation becomes more confident. However, unlike with the Brystons, I don't feel that the EC's basic character changes from the 180's to the 600's. The latter are just *better*! In terms of resolution, however, the Electrocompaniets don't bring out all that the Graham speakers are capable of but even if the Brystons perform a little better in this respect, they, too don't maximize this aspect. The CH Precision A1.5 and the Lejonklous do, but neither amps have the solidity and live-music like engaging presence in the midrange that the Brystons and Electrocompaniets have. For "rocking out loud", I found that the Electrocompaniet amps were the best partners. Not quite as high-res and refined as the CH and Lejonklou, a little dark, and not as smooth and transparent as the Brystons but nevertheless highly engaging due to their communicative midrange and very convincing timbre as well as their impactful dynamics and their big and bold bass.



Speaker Cables

Because the Lejonklou amps only facilitate bananas I switched to a (no longer available) Lejonklou-modified Linn K400 speaker cable with banana connectors during the review,

but during the amp comparisons, it became clear that the Jorma was much more refined and revealing even if used with banana adapters. The Linn/Lejonklou cable sounds full, smooth, and engaging but it also leaves out a lot of resolution and transparency compared to the Jorma. Nevertheless, the Grahams certainly don't only sound great with a cable as upscale as the Jorma. Kimber 4TC or 8TC's, for example, don't quite have the Jorma's refinement but also work incredibly well, providing all the liveliness that the Jorma's are capable of, along with very good transparency.



Tubes

After the interesting results with the various transistor amplifiers, I couldn't help but wonder how the Grahams would perform with tubes. One could be lead to believe that their inherently relaxed character would by definition not work well with tubes but then one would not consider amps such as the Ayon Spirit III. Unusually solid, lively and articulate for a tube amp, the Ayon made the LS5/9 monitors sound absolutely great in the secondary listening room!



The LS5/8's are considerably larger than the Xavian Perla Esclusiva's and, not surprisingly, their bass goes a lot deeper and is also fuller. Not only the bass is different, though, but these speakers also have entirely different presentations. In a nutshell, Graham can be characterized by its luscious, sweet and relaxed midrange while Xavian has a rougher but also more forward, more lively presentation.

Sweeter and slightly more relaxed and not as superbly dynamic and energetic as with the Electrocompaniet or the Brystons, the bass was definitely still tight and the overall delivery was lively and highly involving. Clearly, tubes will work just fine, as long as they are at least as powerful as the Ayon's double pair of KT150's. However, as I prefer my sound to be on the powerful and dynamic side and I find the Grahams already rich enough, for me, the Bryston and Electrocompaniet transistor amps provided the most thrilling experience. Your mileage, as they say, may vary.

Conclusion

The Graham Audio loudspeakers all have an absolutely fabulous midrange. Vocals sound incredibly natural and highly convincing and there is a superbly lyrical and immediately emotionally involving quality to their presentation that makes it easy to get lost in the music. It's not only that the mid-band is superbly liquid, but it is also highly faithful to the source, much more so than most other cabinet speakers. They're not the tightest or most articulate speakers around but they have deep and luscious bass and a unique, one of a kind, delivery that has to be heard.