

ELAC Vela BS 403 stand-mount loudspeakers

by Jason Kennedy

ELAC has clearly grasped that if you are to sell loudspeakers to an audience that would instead prefer things were invisible (or at least no bigger than a Coke can), you have to make it sexy. The Vela range replaces the 400 Line that has been a staple of ELAC's mid-priced offering for many years. The incoming range abandons the traditional rectilinear styling of that series with post-formed corners and oblique angles to produce a beautiful loudspeaker design with tactile textures to add to its allure.

The slopes are what mark out the Vela. The top has an inset aluminium plate with black anodising that gives it a slick look when combined with the gloss black or white finish of the cabinet. However, it's the base that really sets this speaker apart from the crowd: ELAC has created a die-cast plinth that integrates a downward firing port with a V-shaped opening; it looks great from most angles and in theory allows greater flexibility of placement than a standard rear-firing port. This sort of design detailing alongside the very high fit and finish of the speaker as a whole mark ELAC's BS 403 out as more domestically friendly than its competitors.

The same plinth is incorporated into the two floorstanders in the Vela range – the two-and-a-half-way FS 407 and three-way FS 409, but in those models there is a base plate beneath that extends the footprint and provides for spike fixing. The BS 403 is the only bookshelf model in a range that extends to one further iteration in the CC 401 centre channel, which does not have the die-cast base.





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I initially placed the ELACs close to the wall, with about a 25cm gap behind, which seemed appropriate given their size but the resulting thickness in the bass suggested that they need to be further into the room. Extending the gap in increments, I ended up with 40cm between the back of the speaker and the wall.

Before I discovered the low sensitivity of the ELAC, I hooked it up with the most price appropriate amplifier I had to hand, a Rega Brio, and despite its relatively low power (50W), this combination had some very appealing qualities. What initially made an impression was its excellent sense of timing; it's not exceptional in this regard, but better than average thanks to a reasonable degree of clarity through the mid and treble. It's particularly useful on vocals, which perhaps explains why Norah Jones sounds particularly sultry on Herbie Hancock's version of 'Court and Spark' [*River: The Joni Letters*, Verve]. Likewise, Doug MacLeod projects well on his 'Who's Driving This Bus,' where the deep ambience of the recording is easy to hear, and the bass is articulate if not as deep as other small boxes. That said, the curves and styling of the BS 403 mean that its internal volume isn't that big, as the way that the casting cuts into the cabinet takes away a fair amount of space. It's nicely revealing and refined in the upper mid and treble though; that Jet tweeter clearly has its advantages over a lot of the dome tweeters found in the alternatives at this price.

The only area that made itself heard on occasion was the upper bass, which has a slight thickness that makes specific bass notes seem a little congested. I tried moving the speaker further from the wall, and this lightened the effect but didn't eradicate it. I also tried a lighter sounding cable, but the

- ▶ ELAC has used drive unit tech from the 400 Line in Vela, so in the 403 there is one of the brand's distinctive Crystal Membrane midbass drivers, a six-inch example with a 95mm cone supported by a large roll surround. This is a sandwich driver with a paper cone backing bonded to a sheet of stamped aluminium foil, a combination said to reduce colouration and improve power handling. The large surround provides for plus/minus 15mm of excursion, so it should be able to 'belt it out' if required. The Jet 5 planar tweeter is a variant on the Heil Air Motion design with neodymium magnets and a claimed response up to 50kHz. It uses a folded foil membrane that requires so much precision in its construction that robots are used for the most demanding part of the process.

Sensitivity is a lower than average 86dB, and nominal impedance is four Ohms, so it needs a bit of power for best results. ELAC makes a dedicated and suitably shiny stand for the BS 403 with a glass base and polished aluminium column, but as this wasn't supplied, I made do with a Custom Design FS104 Signature stand with its filled central column and Blu-tack under the speakers.

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- ELAC is transparent enough to let you hear when this crucial link has been compromised, so I returned to the Townshend F1 Fractal that is my preferred speaker connection. It's a strange one though; the bass times quite well. It's got good shape and while not bone-crunching gives a good sense of power and weight. Image scale is also right, not spectacular but easily able to reveal the nature of reverb on any given recording, so Van Morrison's 'Fair Play' [*Veedon Fleece*, Warner Bros] and Vivaldi's 'Bellezza Crudel' [*Tone Wik*, Barokkanerne, 2L] have large but distinctly different reverb characteristics. The latter also has an appealing fluidity, and the speakers provide plenty of insight into the piece and its performance.

The smoothness of the treble means that the BS 403 needs to be on-axis, that is pointing straight at you, for maximum vitality and evenness, and even then errs on the side of mellow. This is not a bad thing, but will suit some listeners and systems better than others. I tried the CAD 1543 MkII DAC, for instance, which is incredibly natural and relaxed, and as a result it proved a less suitable partner for this speaker. The Chord DAVE, on the other hand, has a bit more get up and go, a bit more urgency in its leading edges and proved a better match. The DAVE can't smooth out the bass, but it provides the zip that the ELAC needs unless of course, you are looking for a speaker to bliss out with (it's good for that). Around this point, I discovered that an amp with a bit more grunt might be appropriate, so I brought in a Leema Tucana, which surprisingly didn't change things all that dramatically at reasonable levels. When the wick was wound up, however, the ELACs did start to say 'how high' when the Tucana said 'jump,' and they got surprisingly high when I put on 'Seeya' [Deadmau5 *while (1<2)*, Astralwerks]. This is a crunchy dance track with a killer kick drum sound; the size of the ELAC drivers and box limited things, but you can get high-level bass out of them should it be required.

With less visceral material in the form of *Waltz for Debby* [Bill Evans, Riverside] the piano is perky, the audience quiet but present, and Scott LaFaro's bass playing is easy to appreciate. What's particularly helpful is that the acoustics of the venue are so well preserved. And again the tempo of the piece is clear to enjoy, but not thrust to the forefront; it shares equal billing with the melody and tone. My final session was with the full might of an ATC P2, a 150 Watt unliftable beast of a power amp, which brought a greater sense of ease, but didn't cure the bass thickness (it's not a power or control thing as far as one can see). The extra space that the ATC amp brought out was welcome and the depth of ambience it revealed particularly useful at putting you in the room with the musicians on a quality recording; the best ones have a sense of naturalness that is particularly inviting.

The ELAC Vela BS 403 has been created to make decent loudspeakers appeal to those who value style as much as content; the world it seems is not yet able to appreciate that listening brings you closer to God when looks are

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with ported bass reflex enclosure

Driver complement: One Jet 5 air motion tweeter, one 150mm AS XR mid-bass driver

Frequency response: 41Hz–50kHz

Crossover frequency: 2.4kHz

Impedance: 4 Ohms

Sensitivity: 86dB/W/m

Dimensions (HxWxD):
362 × 191 × 240mm

Weight: 7.1kg/each

Finishes: Black High-Gloss,
White High-Gloss

Price: £1,750 per pair

Manufacturer: ELAC

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not considered. Hey, we have *Jersey Shore* and *Big Brother...* it's a shallow universe! This speaker, however, toes the fine line between the conflicting demands of making concessions to contemporary styling but not so much as to undermine its effortless sound. If you are looking for a speaker that fits into a modern lifestyle and encourages you to unwind at the end of the day, this should be on your 'must hear' list. +