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# Jet-set lifestyle

**Chris Ward** gets set for take off with a mix of advanced drivers and svelte cabinet in ELAC's latest 400 series standmount

**L**oudspeaker designers seem to be faced with an increasingly difficult brief: get smaller but sound bigger and better. The trouble is the laws of physics rarely budge, so audio designers and many listeners often feel the need to weigh form over function, with the result being a slippery slope to discrete but ultimately compromised speakers that can lack dynamics. But German manufacturer ELAC clearly has other ideas. The audio experts tasked with revamping its popular 400 series had a tough gig to improve on, but the Vela BS 403 might just be a revelation. Unboxing the reassuringly heavy Vela BS 403, the precision of fit and finish and the quality of the materials brought together so accurately is striking. From the front, the German-

## The speaker delivers airy treble detail that gives performances greater presence

built loudspeaker looks orthodox enough, albeit with a gently curved baffle and unusual drivers. The bass driver is multi-faceted, like a finely cut, concave, black diamond, where the myriad surfaces catch the light intriguingly. This crystal membrane technology is cleverly formed from a sandwich of paper and pressed aluminium foil, promising a combination of lightness and stiffness and therein lower colouration and improved power handling over more traditional cone construction. This driver is described as 150mm, but in practice the face is smaller, albeit without dust cap and a generous roll surround that suggests the possibility of some long-throw air shifting. The high notes come from ELAC's Jet 5 tweeter. Looking similar to a ribbon driver this design operates by vibrating

a very light, finely pleated foil to project high frequencies, with the precision folded surface displacing far more air than a comparable dome. The extreme speed of the tweeter claims to be especially good at reproducing transient dynamics up to a truly ultrasonic 50kHz and a new waveguide is said to improve stereo definition.

This relatively small speaker is already packing some serious technology, but turn it side on and things get even more interesting. In profile the Vela BS 403 shows off some jaunty angles. The black aluminium base incorporates a V-shaped cavity that cleverly integrates an invisible downward-firing port. This suggests ELAC's designers have cunningly sought to optimise loading from a port while in theory also allowing more flexibility in placing the speaker closer to rear walls. Devilishly clever stuff for a standmount speaker. The rakish lines continue with a sloping top plate and gently tapering sides that meet at a slimmer back face. The combination of glossy lacquered faces and soft curves with sharp, matt metalwork is an absolute delight. This elegant design is as smart as it is refreshing as this trapezoid shape clearly seeks to eradicate unwanted standing waves forming between parallel faces. The speaker is available in high gloss white or black priced at £1,750 or walnut adding £90 to the total cost.

Beefy, bi-wireable binding posts accept all common speaker cable terminations and come with metal jumpers for single wiring. The Vela BS 403 is rated at 86dB sensitivity and a nominal 40hm load, so a little tougher to drive than many ported loudspeakers. I connect up a Hegel Röst integrated amplifier (HFC 418) known for its load tolerance and higher damping factor via Black Rhodium Foxtrot speaker cable (HFC 412) and use a Shanling CD-T100 HDCD player connected via Chord

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DETAILS	
<b>PRODUCT</b>	ELAC Vela BS 403
<b>ORIGIN</b>	Germany
<b>TYPE</b>	2-way standmount loudspeaker
<b>WEIGHT</b>	7.1kg
<b>DIMENSIONS (WxHxD)</b>	191 x 362 x 240mm
<b>FEATURES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x Jet 5 tweeter</li> <li>• 1x 150mm mid/bass driver</li> <li>• Quoted sensitivity: 86dB/1W/1m (40hm)</li> </ul>
<b>DISTRIBUTOR</b>	HiFi Network Ltd.
<b>TELEPHONE</b>	01285 643088
<b>WEBSITE</b>	elac.com

Company Epic Analogue interconnects. ELAC offers matching (LS80) stands (£359), but I use a pair of Q Acoustics ones I have to hand and toe-in each speaker towards my listening position.

## Sound quality

Playing Ty Segall's cover of *Every 1's A Winner*, the ELAC instantly locks on to the infectious, funky groove. Dense percussion and guitars have fantastic definition and serious punch. Deep bass extension catches me off guard, even to the point that my son asks if the system has a hidden subwoofer. I initially place the speakers about 20cm from the rear wall but end up nearer 40cm, suggesting that despite the small stature it benefits from a healthy amount of room to breathe. Site this potent speaker too close to a rear or side wall and bass energy can start to thicken up, potentially intruding on midband detail. The stereo image is accurate with a wide sweetspot that accommodates many strong listening positions. The soundscape is precise, but doesn't feel too etched or unforgiving. If anything, a slight diffuseness to the image feels more natural. A heavily distorted guitar riff cuts into the mix like a runaway circular saw, but without any hint of brittleness or excessive

**The substantial bi-wiring binding posts come with metal jumpers for single wiring**



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IN SIGHT



- 1 Jet 5 tweeter
- 2 Bi-wireable binding posts
- 3 Downward-firing bass port
- 4 1x 150mm mid/bass driver



sharpness. The Jet 5 tweeter is very smooth and refined and possibly a revelation if you are more accustomed to traditional dome treble. This is underlined by Segall's vocals having superb definition, yet real human warmth that feels absolutely spot on.

Spinning *Three Golden Trees* by Frazey Ford is also revealing. Leroy Hodges' rock-solid bassline confidently strides forward; full of attitude and body, while brother Charles' warbling organ floats high over a remarkably punchy backbeat.

**The black aluminium V-shaped base integrates an invisible downward-firing port**

This phasey Hammond sound is notoriously difficult to reproduce, but here it's sweet and rich, dripping with honey tones and total coherence. Ford's soulful voice appears centre stage, really showing off the speaker's prowess with vocals. The Vela BS 403 beautifully captures her full emotional expression from intimate frailty to soaring, full-blooded lyrics. The speaker delivers masses of airy treble detail that gives performances greater presence and credibility, and yet it delivers this detail without sounding dry or forward. If you favour vinyl or higher resolution digital music, the clean extended top end of the Vela BS 403 promises

super-tweeter credentials. In any modest standmount speaker this sophisticated tweeter should be the hero, but the bass driver punches well above its weight. Given quality amplification with plenty of control, there is a speed, dynamism and fluidity around the bottom octaves that is so well matched to the highly extended and communicative top end that it positively relishes highly dynamic, well-recorded music.

Playing Vladimir Ashkenazy's rendition of the first movement of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* with the LSO confirms the Vela BS 403 is a super hero, but still mortal. The timbre of the building piano is handled brilliantly, sounding exquisitely present, overflowing with a rich cornucopia of complex high and low harmonics. The large, romantic sweeps of the orchestra are portrayed extremely well, but without the full assurance of the solo instrument. This is where the laws of physics put their foot down. The Vela BS 403 is stupendously talented at surprising low tones and drum beats with enough punch to flatten heavyweights, but a full orchestra demands a different level of air shifting. It's fair to say I'm now absolutely trying to trip the ELAC up, as every small speaker I know is compromised, so it is remarkable how close this standmount gets. If classical purists demand a little more, I feel they could pick the big brother 3½-way Vela FS 409 floorstander with very high confidence.

**The Jet 5 tweeter vibrates a very light, finely pleated foil to project high frequencies**

**Conclusion**

The ELAC Vela BS 403 splits the atom, generating serious power from a tiny package. And rarely does so much dynamism come with such refinement. It's like a BBC LS3/5a on steroids with an extra high and low octave hidden up each sleeve. If you've ever thought about installing subwoofers and super-tweeters, this diminutive speaker seems to cover those bases. It is a slightly tougher load than average, demands quality amplification with plenty of grip and relishes room to breathe, so don't cramp it. Rarely does such a highly advanced tweeter and mid/bass driver come together in such a small enclosure that is as acoustically smart as it is beautifully constructed. If you're after a contemporary-looking speaker that balances form and function with few compromises at an attractive price, you've found it ●

**HOW IT COMPARES**

Markaudio-Sota's £995 Cesti MB (HFC 444) shares the prodigious bass of the ELAC. Its treble is less extended, but the top end is seamless with superior imaging. Falcon Acoustics' RAM Studio 20 £1,995 (HFC 446) has transparency to die for, but lacks the speed and low-end heft of the Vela BS 403. Active speakers like Acoustic Energy's AE1 Active £1,000 (HFC 421) or KEF's LS50 Wireless £2,000 (HFC 433). have the same dynamism, but lack the winning sweetness of the ELAC's top end.

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**OUR VERDICT**

- SOUND QUALITY** ★★★★★ **LIKE:** Highly dynamic, smooth extended treble; strong bass, design and build
- VALUE FOR MONEY** ★★★★★ **DISLIKE:** Needs some space to really perform
- BUILD QUALITY** ★★★★★ **WE SAY:** Dynamic yet highly refined small speaker that packs a mighty punch
- EASE OF DRIVE** ★★★★★

**OVERALL**

