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 bend, 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 Wela BS 403 might just be a revelation.

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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

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

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 is stupendously talented at shifting. It's fair to say I'm now absolutely trying to trip the ELAC up, as every small speaker I know is desperate to cramp it. Rarely does such a highly refined small speaker seem to cover those bases. It is a slightly tougher load than average, demands quality amplification with plenty of grip and is more than up to the task. The ELAC Vela BS 403 is a super hero, but still mortal.

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 cram 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.