

Spendor **S8e** loudspeaker



It's big and it's a Spendor, but the all new S8e offers the brand's near legendary qualities – and then some

Spendor S8e

PRICE	£1895/pair
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The original S series was Spendor's first range of speakers following the company's purchase by Audiolab's co-founder Philip Swift in 2001. It aimed to retain the near-legendary qualities of Spendor's traditional designs while adding a more room friendly appearance and greater frequency response. The new S series has been considerably enlarged and now consists of one standmount, four floorstanders, the innovative SR5 wallmount [HFN, Nov '03] and two centre channels. The S8e is the second largest of the floorstanders, a two-way, featuring a new version of Spendor's hallmark 210mm mid-bass driver.

Despite looking like a carbon copy of the earlier S8, the new Spendor S8e is a new speaker. The cabinet uses a braced, thick-walled construction rather than Spendor's traditional damped, thin-wall approach.

To reduce cabinet resonances further, the rear of each driver is clamped to an adjacent brace, using a damping pad that converts unwanted energy to heat. Simply placing a hand on the side of the S8e's cabinet demonstrates the effectiveness of this feature, with very little vibration apparent, even when low-frequency

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material is being played. As for bass loading, the S8e utilises a development of the linear flow port used in the original S series (see 'Technology' box), this system being said to give great flexibility when it comes to speaker placement. Indeed, a close-to-wall location is quite acceptable, if domestic circumstances or room matching so dictate.

Both drivers are completely new units. The 27mm tweeter features a dome diaphragm manufactured from a new, extremely low density, 'Sonolex' material. The driver also incorporates a vented pole piece to minimise reflected energy, and a damped rear chamber that reduces the fundamental resonance frequency of the tweeter, with claimed benefits in bandwidth, increased dynamic range and improved headroom. The



The substantial stainless steel terminal plate is secured to the cabinet via a damping membrane while the supplied heavy spiked plinth isolates the speaker's drivers from unwanted vibrations

210mm bass-midrange driver is a propriety Spendor unit, utilising a brand new ep38 polymer cone material boasting a high stiffness-to-mass ratio while providing excellent internal damping. It's also been optimised for its mid-bass duties, behaving consistently well with both pure piston motion and the motion across the cone demanded by midrange frequencies. Linearity and dispersion of the midrange is also improved by a large, optimally profiled, phase plug.

An interesting feature of both drivers is the use of 'bucking magnets', rather than conventional shielding, to allow use close to CRT screens. Also,

great care has been taken with the speaker's crossover network. Top quality components are used throughout, and the substantial stainless steel terminal plate is mounted to the cabinet via a damping membrane – no resonating plastic panels here. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the crossover is that no series gain adjustment resistors are used. Instead, a tapped inductor is used to adjust the output level of the tweeter, ensuring that resistor non-linearity is eliminated.

In terms of vital statistics, frequency response for the S8e is listed as 44Hz–20kHz (±3dB, on a reference axis). The –6dB point is 32Hz, sensitivity is 89 dB/1W and the nominal load is an 'easy' 8 ohms, with a minimum of 5 ohms. Cabinet size is 925 x 320 x 226mm (hwd) with the attached plinth extending the footprint to 340

x 316mm (wd). Weight is a substantial 25kg per speaker. Real wood veneer finishes of cherry, maple, rosenut and black ash are all available at the standard price

Source equipment for the review consisted of an SME 20/2A and Sumiko Pearwood analogue front end plus a Musical Fidelity Trivista hybrid SACD player. Amplification included the Musical Fidelity kW/kWP combo, the new Arcam C30 pre and P1 monoblocks plus an Arcam 7R integrated. The main comparison speakers were Martin Logan Prodigies and Quad 22Ls.

Right from the start, the Spendors threw out a huge, three dimensional soundstage, with impressively solid images spread across the whole width of my listening room. In fact, in two particular spatial aspects they comprehensively out-performed my reference Martin Logans.

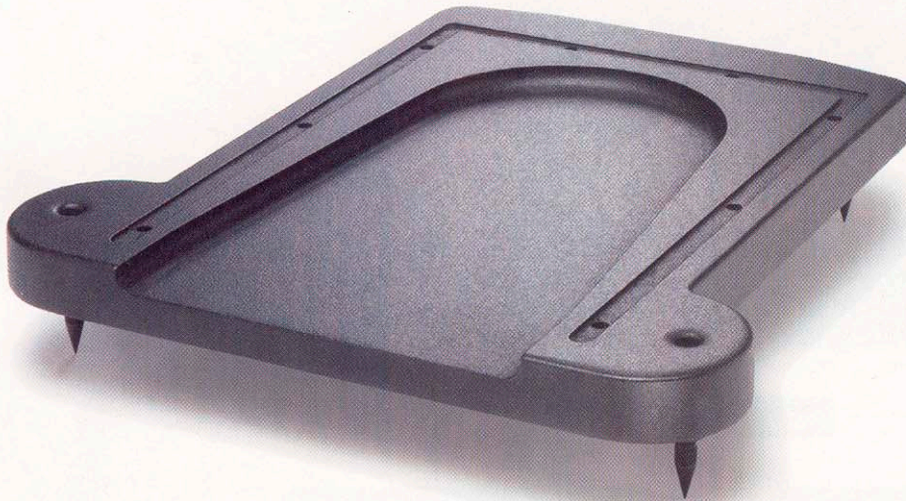
Firstly, image stability, when sitting way off axis, was exceptional. Central images stayed resolutely static, even when sitting a couple of feet outside the right hand speaker.

Secondly, the Spendors performed the most amazing disappearing act I have heard from any speaker – Quad 989s included. Images simply refused to attach themselves to the vicinity of the cabinets.

The title track from Nina Simone's *My Baby Just Cares For Me* illustrated this perfectly. This Charly CD has a rather odd stereo balance, with piano situated dead centre, but vocals apparently welded to the left hand speaker. Well, that seemed to have been the case with every other speaker I have played the track through. However, with the Spendors, the vocal was clearly situated behind and slightly inside the left hand speaker.

This small change provided a much more satisfying effect: a grand piano sited lengthwise between the speakers with Ms Simone situated

Clockwise from below: the crossover features a tapped inductor to adjust tweeter output; the tweeter dome is made from a new low density 'Sonolux' material; the plinth is 340mm wide



squarely at the business end. With this new benchmark to work with, I can see hernias on the horizon, as I try to figure out whether my Prodigies are as optimally sited as I had thought.

The words that sprang to mind to describe the Spendor's sound were neutrality, transparency and balance. A studiously neutral component can underwhelm on first listen, but the Spendors did not fall into this trap. Firstly, the speaker's impressive spatial qualities knock you for a six, then the S8es play the truly transparent component's trump card: whatever you play through them, you cannot catch them out.

Try a sumptuous recording such as Mary Coughlan's *I Can't Make You Love Me*, and they return a performance absolutely dripping with atmosphere, presence and emotion. Spin up The Jam's sparsely recorded paean to urban frustration *A Town Called Malice* and they pump



Deutsche Grammophon CD reissues of the Janacek Quartet playing Haydn's *The Joke*, *Serenade* and *Fifths*, the qualities of each instrument were drawn exquisitely. Even when the pitch of violin and viola converged, the timbral character of each remained distinct.

In terms of frequency extremes, the S8es definitely had a little less bass weight than my Martin Logan Prodigies. However, they trumped the Martin Logans when it came to speed and their absolutely seamless integration. With Leftfield's *Phat Planet*, the S8es showed a seemingly absolute lack of overhang that had the bass driving the track along in an irresistible manner. In fact, I can't recall hearing this track sound so cohesive.

In the high frequencies, the Spendor's did not quite have the laser-like incision of, say, JM Labs Utopia range, but there was absolutely no perceived lack of air, attack or detail. Rebecca

In my listening room at least, they trumped the Martin Logans in terms of both speed and their absolutely seamless integration

the venom and energy into the room in a rivetting primeval flood. Even with 'low-fi' Ska classics, the S8es delivered. Working with recordings of highly variable quality, they consistently produced performances of such rhythmic brio that, temporarily at least, the need for the finer points of high fidelity reproduction were forgotten.

With vocals the S8es reproduced every nuance perfectly, with a natural, almost organic quality, that I have only ever heard from electrostatics at several times their price. Another party trick was imbuing harmony and backing singers with the kind of detail and presence you hope for from a lead vocalist. It was a similar story when handling acoustic instruments. Listening to some intimate

Pigeon's version of *Spanish Harlem* can be a bit of a minefield in the top end, the lyrics containing a plethora of 's' sounds, but the S8es reproduced the almost preternaturally pure vocals perfectly.

The Spendors are simply stunning speakers. Driven by 20-odd grands worth of Musical Fidelity kW/KWP amplification they really do leave you asking the question 'why pay more?' When driven by £300 worth of Arcam 7R, they redefined my expectations of what is possible from so-called budget electronics. Whether you are moving up from sub-£1000 components or looking for a medium-sized-room-friendly partner for exotic electronics, you'd be crazy to overlook them. ■

Ian Harris



Technology

Bass loading is care of Spendor's Linear Flow Port. This feature is carried over from the S8e's predecessor but, as with nearly every aspect of the new speaker, significant enhancements have been made. In the original S range, the base of the port was a slanted wooden panel, whereas in the S8e, the top of the plinth is CNC machined to create a critically tapered wave-guide which minimises standing waves – hence the '3D' nomenclature.

The outward manifestation of this technology is the rectangular port, marking the boundary between the base of the speaker and the composite plinth. This aperture has a much larger area than a tubular port, reducing air velocity and preventing any overload 'chuffing'.

In addition to the benefits of lower velocity airflow, the linear flow port gives highly symmetrical behaviour, with air moving both in and out of the port smoothly, allowing the speaker to be placed close to a wall without bass quality being adversely affected. Any midrange energy is absorbed by wadding within the cabinet. The absence of any midrange port emissions is a key factor in the speaker's overall coherence.

Features

- Two-way floorstanding speaker
- Nominal 8ohm load
- Extraordinarily transparent sound