

The Spendor S8e Loudspeaker

by Paul Messenger

It was during the Bristol Show in February that Philip Swift (owner) and Graham Landick (designer) drew my attention to a whole new range of Spendor speakers. It's just as well they did, as I might not have noticed them, because the new models look just like they did before, and have very similar type numbers too – just distinguished by an 'e' suffix. This implies that evolution has taken place, in the form of all sorts of fundamental changes to the main drive units. Which seems reason enough to take a fresh look and listen to something from the new generation of S/e models.

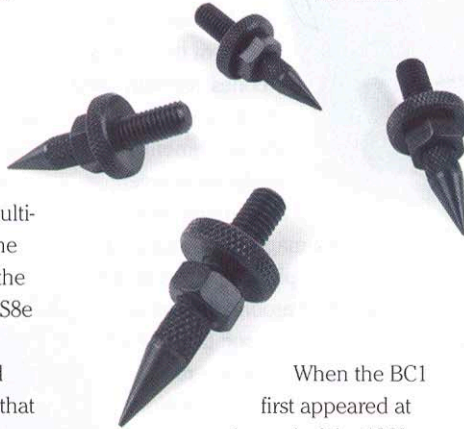
But which model? There are five regular stereo pairs to choose from – one stand-mount and four floorstanders – besides a clutch of multi-channel extras. The stand-mount is the S3e, while the floorstanders include the two-and-a-half-way S5e, and S6e and S8e two-ways, plus the three-way S9.

It's not an easy decision. By and large I'm wary of three-ways, finding that any theoretical advantages are often outweighed by their extra complexity, and that two-ways (and two-and-a-half-ways) tend to work rather better at normal listening levels. I therefore left the S9e out of the picture. I was tempted by the S5e, which looks particularly cute and neat, but I've always had a high regard for Spendor's 8-inch two-ways, going right back to the classic BC1 (which still serves me as an occasional reference), so the S8e looked the likeliest contender. Besides, it was the S8-without-an-e which I reviewed for Hi-Fi+ a couple of years ago, so it seemed logical to give its evolved successor a whirl.

When reviewing a loudspeaker, it's nice to be able to set up some sort of context. I did actually suggest it might be interesting to compare the S8e with

its S8 predecessor, but Philip didn't think this was such a good idea. He did, however, bring along a pair of S6es as well as the S8es, and that in itself proved illuminating. And of course I still had the measured data I took for the original S8, which was also rather interesting.

Spendor's heritage goes back some thirty-five years, and it's intriguing to note how loudspeakers as a breed have changed down the years, even though the laws of acoustics remain resolutely the same.



When the BC1 first appeared at the end of the 1960s, it was unusual in a number of respects, though with hindsight, had a powerful influence on the way things subsequently developed.

Back in the 1960s, 'serious' loudspeakers still reflected the earlier era when systems were monophonic and amplification was low-powered and thermionic. They were big and bulky affairs, usually based around 12-inch drive units. Taking advantage of increased solid state amplifier power and the doubling up of stereophony, the BC1 opted for a much lower sensitivity, using a relative small 8-inch main driver – a size normally only found at the time in the 'budget bookshelf' boxes like Wharfedale Lintons and Dentons. Thirty five years on, the 8-inch driver has itself

become a rarity, supplanted by the 6.5-inch size, used singly or in multiples, that dominate today's scene.

Other influential innovations introduced by Spendor's BC1 included stand-mounting and free space siting, neither of which were common prior to the 1970s. Those original BC1 stands lifted the 2 cu ft speakers just 1 ft off the deck, and had castors (not spikes!) so they could be moved easily back towards the wall when not in use.

Stand-mount two-ways grew in popularity through the 1970s and 1980s, and are still the choice of enthusiasts today, though the mid-1980s saw floorstanders reappearing, some as two-ways, others using the extra enclosure and the falling real price of drive units to experiment with alternative driver configurations, like two-and-a-half-ways. Some – like the Naim SBL and Rega ELA – used the whole of the enclosure acoustically; others effectively took a stand-mount design and extended the box down to the ground, fitting spikes and blanking off the lower section of the enclosure to allow greater bandwidth or sensitivity.

Although the two-way stand-mount still arguably makes the most sense from an all round performance perspective, there's no denying that, outside the performance-led enthusiast sector, most customers prefer to avoid having bits of ironmongery in the lounge, and prefer floorstanders for largely aesthetic reasons. Spendor still makes classic large stand-mounts like the SP2/3e, known logically as the Classic series, but the S-series is where the real commercial action lies these days.

A major reason for the popularity of 6.5-inch and 5-inch (165mm and 130mm) drivers lies in their potential for use in fashionably slim and hence ▶

► discreet enclosures. An 8-inch (200mm) unit inevitably requires a chunkier cabinet, but the S8e still manages to look attractively compact, if a little chunkier than its S6e stablemate.

It's actually an exceptionally good looking loudspeaker, thanks to high class ingredients and some neat detailing. The sharp-edged enclosure is all over veneered in real wood, with a choice of cherry, maple, 'rosenut' or black ash.



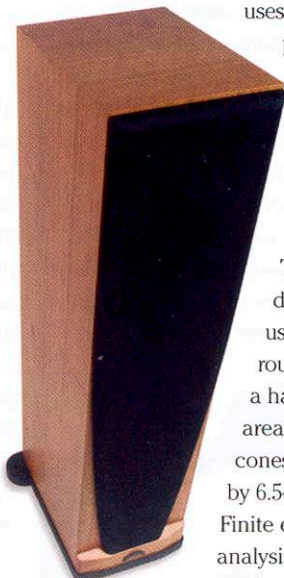
It seems a shame to cover up

the veneered front with its flush-mount drivers, but the shield-shaped grille, protruding from a shaped hardwood trim strip, adds a distinguished and distinctive touch.

A hefty black MDF plinth provides a finishing touch, lateral extensions at the back ensuring superior physical stability. An unusual method of securing the chunky 8mm spikes is adopted here, and proved highly effective too. Each spike has two lock nuts: the upper serrated circular one being finger-tightened while adjusting the spikes to level the speaker; then the lower hex-nut is tightened against it to ensure the spike stays tight over the long haul, without risking damage to the socket

arrangement.

The S8e costs £1,895 per pair, a significant increase over the £1,700/pair S8 predecessor, but numerous changes have been introduced to improve the performance, so maybe the increase is justified. The cast-frame main driver



uses a new ep38 polymer cone material, plus a new and carefully optimised surround material too. The 150mm diameter cone used here has roughly one and a half times the area of the 120mm cones normally used by 6.5-inch drivers. Finite element analysis has been used to improve the

linearity of the magnetic motor, and a shaped phase plug improves its top end smoothness around the crossover. A new type of 27mm soft fabric dome tweeter is also fitted, with a rear chamber to absorb back radiation.

The unusual port arrangement at floor level uses a wide rear slot to reduce air velocity, as before, but its curiously asymmetric internal shape has been further refined to avoid standing waves and promote symmetrical airflow. The well braced enclosure includes a polymer damper that mechanically couples the main driver to the box and damps any vibration energy.

The crossover network is now mounted on a damped stainless steel plate to

inhibit mechanical vibration, along with two terminal pairs for optional bi-wiring or bi-amping. The inductor cores have been updated and series resistors to attenuate the tweeter output are deliberately avoided, using auto-transformers instead. Each loudspeaker pair is matched to within 1dB across the audio spectrum.

As mentioned, Philip had brought over both the S6e and S8e models, so first of all we connected up the smaller model. This sounded well enough in a rather restrained sort of way, but swapping over to the larger S8e was particularly interesting because the two speakers have so many similarities in terms of ingredients and tonal balance, yet the S8e sounded clearly and convincingly superior in terms of its dynamic capabilities and expression. I've long suspected that a larger drive unit with (slightly) greater sensitivity has an inherent advantage over its smaller equivalent, though it's virtually impossible to isolate sufficient variables to confirm such a theory.

The comparison of these two Spondors, however, certainly seems to provide some support for the hypothesis, though whether cone area or sensitivity is the factor responsible is impossible to say.

No less interesting is the quite substantial differences between the S8e and its S8 predecessor. Regrettably I don't have an impedance trace for the S8, but comparing the in-room averaged frequency responses reveals a quite considerable change in the midrange balance. Although the bass region (below 150Hz) is essentially the same for both models, the new model has roughly 3dB less output (on



average) through the broad mid-band up to 2kHz, and around 2dB less through the treble above 3kHz. The result is that the low-to-mid bass is a little more prominent than before, relatively speaking, but the overall balance is rather smoother and more even than it was. Indeed, the whole frequency range above 60Hz is very well balanced indeed, and the cross-over transition at around 2,3kHz is considerably smoother than before. Furthermore, apart from being a little leaner through the upper bass and lower mid-band (70-300Hz), the new S8e delivers a balance that shows surprisingly close correspondence to my thirty year old BC1s. Which is no bad thing, of course, since few if any designs have been better voiced than that classic monitor.

The consequence is a speaker which has sacrificed a little sensitivity compared to its predecessor – I'd give it 86.5dB/W rather than the 89dB claimed and achieved by the S8. But that's not a big price to pay for the lovely mid-band voicing that this new 8e delivers. There wasn't a whole lot wrong with the S8, although voices did sound a little shut in. Now they simply sound beautifully natural, with no trace of forcing or aggression, and just a little restraint. The latter probably has less to do with the voicing than a slight lack of dynamic expression. The S8e might have the edge over the S6e in this regard, and tightening its driver fixing bolts and making sure the spikes were firmly fixed helped sharpen things up a little, but it doesn't quite convey the same level of tension

or instrumental texture that one can find elsewhere.

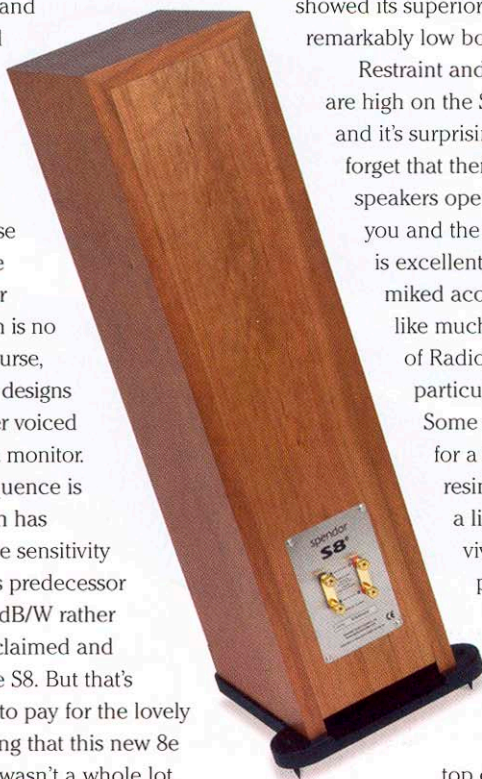
Just prior to auditioning the S8e I was enjoying a pair of enormous Tannoy Yorkminsters – with a 12-inch alnico magnet dual concentric driver and 93dB sensitivity. Changing over to the Spondors provided a clear illustration of the compromises involved in all loudspeaker designs. Whereas the Tannoy supplied the micro-dynamics that provide subtle extra clues about, say, the makeup of a string section, the Spondor showed its superior side through remarkably low boxy colorations.

Restraint and self-effacement are high on the S8e's agenda, and it's surprisingly easy to forget that there's a pair of speakers operating between you and the music. Imaging is excellent, and naturally miked acoustic material, like much of the output of Radio 3 worked particularly well. Some might wish for a little more resin and catgut, a little greater vividness and more pronounced *chiaroscuro* perhaps, and a little more openness at the extreme top end too, but this speaker has great natural charm that makes for a very relaxing as well as an essentially informative experience.

I expected to find the bass alignment a little troublesome, but apart from a slight lack of warmth and nourishment through the cello register, the bottom end simply sounded clean and reassuringly weighty, with good timing and no real tendency to 'thump'. However, I can't quite go along with Spondor's

suggestion that the S8e will still work as well when placed quite close to a wall – for me this is very much a free space design, from both a bass and a mid-band perspective.

I couldn't resist the temptation to compare the S8es to my thirty year old BC1s, and have to admit the original model still had a slight edge in overall transparency – the alnico effect maybe? But the S8e is unquestionably a Spondor, fully maintaining the company's fine tradition in a package that is altogether more practical and lounge-friendly than its Classic predecessors.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	2 way floorstanding, reflex-loaded loudspeaker
Drive Units -	
HF:	27mm coated fabric dome
Bass/mid:	210mm frame; ep38 polymer cone
Bandwidth:	44Hz-20kHz ± 3dB -6dB at 32Hz
Sensitivity:	89dB (measured at 86.5dB)
Impedance:	8 Ohms (nominal) 5 Ohms (minimum)
Crossover frequency:	4.0kHz
Power handling:	15 - 300 watts
Magnetically Shielded:	Yes
Dimensions (HxWxD):	925x226x320mm
Weight:	25 Kg
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple, Rosenut, Black Ash veneers
Price:	£1,895 per pair

Manufacturer:

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