

Sam Tellig

## Spendor Speakers &amp; Intelligent Chips

Spendor Audio Systems occupies a rarefied place in the world of British hi-fi. The company's loudspeakers have always been more about performance and engineering than sales and marketing.

Yet Spendor has staying power. How many speaker companies have come and gone since 1969, whether in Britain or in North America? That was the year Spencer Hughes and his wife, Dorothy, founded the firm: Spen+Dor. Their son, Derek, joined the company later. Spendor's first product was the BC1, rated by this rag in November 2002 as one of the 100 greatest hi-fi products of all time.

I owned a pair of BC1s in the 1970s. Few speakers then were so neutral, so free of coloration—or so musical. That was a time when British loudspeakers ruled. I remember what I paid for my pair: \$750. That was a lot in 1973, when a pair of Large Advents could be had for \$300 or so. And \$500 would get you a very good power amplifier indeed.

I've just received an invitation to audition a \$145,000 speaker system. When did this madness start? When Wilson Audio Specialties introduced the original WAMM, for eightysomething thousand bucks—more, at the time, than most people paid for a house.

Spendor never went along with this relentless push upmarket. I figure that speaker prices have shot up by at least a factor of four since 1973. That would peg the BC1 today at \$3000 or more. Three kilobucks happens to be exactly the price of Spendor's new S8e loudspeaker. Wonder why there aren't more audiophiles? Maybe it's because there aren't more companies like Spendor.

The BC1—and the models that followed—emerged from Spencer Hughes' years of work at the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department, under its chief, D.E.L. Shorter. Hughes worked alongside such other audio engineering greats as Dudley Harwood, who went on to found Harbeth, and Jim Rogers, who established the eponymous Rogers brand.

There's still a demand for traditional

BBC-style monitors, which is why Philip Swift said, "Not so fast." He's keeping Spendor's Classic line in production—speakers that follow from earlier models, such as the BC1.



Spendor S8e sounded like Goldilocks in Sam's living room: just right.

I'm sorry. I haven't introduced Phil Swift.

Phil is a stalwart of the British hi-fi industry. For some years he ran the Audiolab electronics firm, which he later sold to TAG/McLaren, who subsequently gave up on hi-fi. It's harder to sell hi-fi than it is to sell watches, I'm sure. Meanwhile, by 2001, Spendor had fallen on lean times, due mainly to a lack of new and up-to-date models, and almost nothing suited for home cinema. (The Hughes family had sold the company in the 1990s.)

Phil acted quickly. Almost...eponymously. Keeping the Classic series in production, Phil and his team developed the S series, now superseded by the Se line. The trick was to keep traditional Spendor customers happy—they're two-channel listeners, mainly—while finding new buyers, including home cinema buffs.

He's managed to pull it off. The S5e wowed Art Dudley (and John Atkinson) in the September 2004 *Stereophile*.

It's no surprise Artie beat me to it—Spendor speakers were big favorites at his previous venue, *Listener* magazine. But I should have been...well, swifter.

Fortunately, there are many more speakers in Spendor's Se range: four floorstanders, one stand-mount, two center-channels, one on-wall model, and a subwoofer. The range offers choices and flexibility for two-channel listeners and home cinema fans alike. I chose the S8e for review; the second model down from the top, it retails for \$2999/pair in your choice of real-wood veneers: cherry, maple, rosenut, or black ash. Those looking for a \$145,000 stereo system can drop their megabucks elsewhere. You don't need to be a big spen-dah.

At 36.4" high by 8.9" wide by 12.6" deep, the S8e is neither large nor small for a floorstander. In our living room, the pair of them look (and sound) like Goldilocks: just right. It weighs 55 lbs—heavy enough not to be flimsy, light enough that I could lift it unaided to experiment with positioning. An integral MDF plinth stabilizes the speaker and incorporates Spendor's 3D Linear Flow Port.

The S8e's construction differs from that of Spendor's Classic models, whose thin-walled cabinets were designed to flex. Those cabinets give traditional Spendor's a slightly warm, slightly woody (not woolly) sound that I find very enjoyable, even if some don't consider it up to date. Check out the Spendor Classics. I used to regard my BC1s almost as animate objects, in the Jungian sense—something of their creator's spirit seemed to reside within, the way a maker's soul is part of a hand-made musical instrument.

The S8e's veneered MDF cabinet, on the other hand, is 1" thick, and each driver is clamped to the cabinet with a brace. Knock on a Spendor Classic cabinet and you can hear it resonate. Knock on the S8e and it's like tapping a brick. You could break your knuckles.

The sensitivity of the S8e is rated at 89dB/W/m, and its nominal impedance is specified as 8 ohms, falling to a minimum of 5 ohms. Heroic amplification might be nice but is not

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required—an integrated amp from Creek, Musical Fidelity, McIntosh, YBA, or Unison Research would probably do the trick in most rooms for most listeners.

Spendor was one of the first speaker manufacturers to use a polymer bass/midrange driver—maybe the first. This new 8" proprietary Spendor driver uses an "ep38" polymer cone with a synthetic rubber surround. The cone is said to have a high ratio of stiffness to mass, while the rubbery surround is highly compliant. This driver can jump!

A large phase plug sits menacingly in the center of the cone to disperse the sound and make it more linear. Phase plugs are quite the thing nowadays. The French scribes have the right word: *olives*, or nuclear missiles. They do look purposeful.

You won't see the nuclear warhead if you leave the grille in place. The S8e sounded just a tad more transparent with its grille removed, but the grille adds to the art deco retro appearance that accounts for much of the speaker's decorative appeal. I think the S8e is one of the most attractive loudspeakers you can buy at any price, but that's personal taste.

The bass/midrange driver crosses over at 4kHz to a 1" dome tweeter,

made by SEAS (to Spendor's specs). The tweeter dome is made from a new fabric, Sonolex. A vented pole-piece



Fabric-dome tweeter is made by SEAS to Spendor's specs.

minimizes reflected energy and a damped rear chamber tames the driver's fundamental resonance frequency.

I could have sworn I was listening to a single-driver loudspeaker, and I almost was. Resolution. Focus. Coherence. The 8" bass/midrange unit handles most of the music, relieved in the

the plinth. Inside, cut into the plinth with a CNC (computer numerical control) router, is a tapered waveguide. The waveguide is said to minimize standing waves more effectively than a conventional tubular port. In any event, the bass response is exceptionally controlled...and swift! (Bracing the driver probably has something to do with it, too.)

The plinth, already attached to the speaker, has threads on the bottom for carpet-piercing spikes. Fiddling with the front spikes enabled me to tilt each speaker up by a few degrees, perhaps lifting the soundstage, too. In the setup instructions, Spendor illustrates a degree of toe-in—maybe 15°. You can experiment by crossing the axes of the two tweeters in front of your listening chair.

I usually place speakers in our living room a little more than 3' from the front wall. But furniture intrudes on the sound. With the S8e, I was able to place the speakers a little more than 2'

from the front wall. I was able to boost the in-room bass response a little while giving the speakers a clear shot to the listening chair.

Remember the Unison Research

Unico SE from last month? *Fantastico*. Equally splendid but different was Musical Fidelity's A5, a 200Wpc integrated amplifier. Each retails for \$2500. Scratch the notion that you need to spend more than \$125,000 for superb sound.

For most of my listening I used my Parasound JC-1 400Wpc monoblock amps (\$7000/pair, and few solid-state amps sound much better) with my Purest Sound Systems 500 passive preamp. CD sources included the Musical Fidelity A5 CD player and the visually and sonically astonishing Shanling CD-T flying-saucer CD player, which I'll write about next month. I used a Sony XA-777ES to play SACDs.

I then substituted Sutherland's new Director line stage (\$3000), distributed by Acoustic Sounds, for the passive preamp. Hot Diggity, as Perry Como used to exclaim. What a difference that active line stage made! With active preamplification, the Parasound JC-1s and



Parasound JC-1. An ST reference for more than two years.

treble by that soft-dome SEAS tweeter. No metal drivers here, or anywhere else in the Spendor range. If you suffer the condition known as metal-dome tweeteritis, hark!

The S8e's frequency response is given as 44Hz–20kHz,  $\pm 3$ dB. Some audiophiles may wish for greater bass extension. If you want to shake the floor, Spendor makes a matching subwoofer. Praise for Spendor for *not* taking the frequency response too low.

That's it. Simplicity. Two drivers, one crossover. The crossover avoids using series resistors to adjust the gain, which might take away some of the music's energy and resolution. Two pairs of high-quality speaker binding posts attach to a stainless-steel terminal plate with a damping layer between it and the rear panel. The damping layer is typical of Spendor's attention to detail.

The 3D Linear Flow Port is visible as a rectangular slot at the back of each speaker, where the cabinet meets

## CONTACTS

**JSMR H.K. Science & Technology Co., Ltd.**, Room 2202, 22/F, 168, Sai Yeung Choi Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Guangzhou Office: Room 211, Taole Building, 12, Dashatou the 2nd Rd., Haiyin, Guangzhou, China. Web: [www.hktwo.com](http://www.hktwo.com). US distributor: Golden Sound, P.O. Box 1293, McLean, VA 22101. Tel: (888) 811-5818. Fax: (703) 852-3486. Web: [www.dhcones.com](http://www.dhcones.com).

**Spendor Audio Systems, Ltd.**, Station Road Industrial Estate, Hailsham, East Sussex BN27 2ER, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)1323-843474. Fax: (44) (0)1323-442254. Web: [www.spendoraudio.com](http://www.spendoraudio.com). US distributor: Quality Service & Distribution (QS&D), 33 McWhirt Loop #108, Fredericksburg, VA 22406. Tel: (800) 659-3711, (540) 372-3711. Fax: (540) 372-3713. Web: [www.qsandd.com](http://www.qsandd.com).

the Spendor were able to deliver exquisitely defined and controlled bass.

The Spendor S8e did not deliver the kind of forced, punchy, one-note bass so beloved by the beer-swilling, toe-tapping crowd. (But what music do they listen to? What music do *you* listen to?) And the bass—as is obvious from that stated frequency response—is not the most extended. Spendor makes a sub for that. But the bass was always tight and tuneful: well-defined, precise, and fast.

I remember my late friend Howie Hyperfy and his famous phrase, “Tons of bass, tons of bass, bass all over the place.” The phrase fit all too many systems.

It was *not* what I experienced with the Spendor S8e. This was some of the best bass I have ever heard from a loudspeaker selling for less than \$10,000/pair. I was able to get the S8e's to disappear—almost in the way that I associate with the best small monitor speakers. The sound didn't crowd around the two speakers. Try different degrees of toe-in and you'll likely hear the changes.

The main thing is the S8e's midrange—glorious. This is why Spendor's have enjoyed such a reputation for the past 36 years: they get the midrange right. Voices and instruments sound natural, harmonically right. For the most part, I was using solid-state amplification—*great* solid-state, to be sure.

The other thing that makes the Spendor S8e special is the seamless quality of its sound. This is what you get with a great two-way—especially one whose bass/midrange driver crosses over at 4kHz.

The S8e performed superbly with all types of music—at least all types of music I listened to. I didn't try any of my son's Throbbing Gristle—but I notice he's given up on the rough stuff. With classical recordings and jazz, I responded to the truth of timbre, the coherence.

I've been enjoying one particular CD for the past week: *Tom Wopat Sings Harold Arlen* (Hyena TMF 9329). The standards include “Over the Rainbow,” “That Old Black Magic,” and—my favorite—“If I Only Had a Brain.” Yes, if only. The recording is simple and natural—no engineering gimmicks. It

## Spendor S8e Loudspeaker

sounds as if each take is presented in its entirety, flaws and all. I like that. It's the way records were made, direct to disc, in the era of the 78.

Wopat's is not the strongest, clearest voice. There's a vulnerable, almost tentative quality that makes him sound all the more human—and appealing. Sometimes he strains. Sometimes his voice breaks up. He's human. A veteran of many Broadway musicals, Wopat is a superb song stylist and vocal interpreter. With the Spendor S8e, he was present in our living room—every nuance. It's a shame music like this isn't played much on the radio anymore. My son and daughter have gone wild over this album. My daughter has the entire album on her computer at work. When there's an issue or a problem, she presses a few keys and out comes “Accent-u-ate the positive, eeliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, and don't mess with Mr. In-Between.” Roy Hall loves the album, too.

What do *you* like? Great imaging? The Spendor S8e's placed all performers with precision and stability—call it focus. This, combined with their stunning harmonic presentation, often give me almost the illusion of listening to live music. A big soundstage? I would not describe the S8e's soundstage as “huge.” It certainly wasn't exaggerated, but it was convincing—and varied, as it should, from recording to recording.

If I had to pick one adjective to describe Spendor speakers, then and now, the adjective would be *honest*. Nothing is hyped to make the speakers more marketable—more able to be left standing after some stupid audiophile “shoot-out.” Nothing is rigged to make recordings sound other than what they are. The S8e aims to get out of the way and let you hear each recording. With classical orchestral recordings, I noticed

details in the performances—and the scores—that I hadn't picked up before. *That* is a sure sign of a great loudspeaker.

That, of course, is what the BBC's Loudspeaker Research Department was all about. And it's why this new series of Spendor speakers is true to the tradition. I can imagine that some owners of Spendor Classic speakers might very well want to switch to an Se model.