

HEY BIG SPENDOR

Spendor has revamped its 'S' Series speakers with some bold new thinking

PRODUCT Spendor S9e

TYPE Floorstanding loudspeaker

PRICE £2,895 per pair

KEY FEATURES Size (WxHxD): 24x101x38cm

Weight: 36.5kg • 220mm Kevlar/paper cone bass driver • 140mm polymer cone mid driver • 27mm soft dome tweeter • Sensitivity/impedance: 90dB/8 ohms

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There was a time when a Spendor range would stay in production for a decade or more. Indeed, the company still makes one of its earliest models for certain markets (the legendary BC1), but the most up-to-date range, the 'S' Series, has been revamped after just over two years. This may have something to do with the brand's still fairly new owner and one-time Audiolab founder Phil Swift – he clearly appreciates that in the current market it pays to keep your product up-to-the-minute.

There are five stereo pairs in the new 'Se' range, four floorstanders and a standmount, plus two and three-way centre channels and a wall-mounted surround speaker. There are even plans to release a subwoofer, which will be a first for the company.

Although this speaker looks superficially similar to its S9 predecessor, there are so many changes that the relationship between the two is limited to the shape and size of the cabinet and little else. The S9e is a ground-up design featuring new materials, drive units and design features. The cabinet is made out of much thicker MDF, the highly damped thin wall approach of the earlier series having been ditched in favour of a 25mm thick cabinet with extensive bracing. The latter doubles as bracing for the drive units as well, each having a thrust pad and structure behind it to inhibit resonance.

At the cabinet's base, an integrated plinth has replaced a bolt-on version and this forms part of the '3D linear flow port', a slot-shaped port which connects to a tapered 'waveguide' which has a much larger area than tube reflex ports. This reduces the velocity of airflow which Spendor claims makes the output less audible, but it was harder to test their ability to produce a consistent quality of bass regardless of proximity to walls because the sheer extension and quantity of bass produced required plenty of space to work in our room.

A three-way design, the S9e has a 27mm SEAS soft dome tweeter backed by a damped and vented chamber, which covers the audio range from 4.8kHz to 20kHz plus. Midrange is managed by what looks like a classic Spendor polymer cone but which in this case uses a new polymer dubbed 'EP38', its claim to fame being a high stiffness-to-weight ratio with excellent damping characteristics. Its 140mm, phase-plugged chassis has its own enclosure within the main box and like all the 'Se' range, the drive units feature full shielding.

At 500Hz the midrange unit hands over to the bass driver, an all-new design with a hefty 22cm chassis housing a Kevlar/paper composite cone, which is located by twin suspension spiders and features a large vented voice coil. The chassis and magnet are painted black for maximum heat radiation – reducing heat build-up also reduces distortion at higher levels. Meanwhile, a substantial dust dome achieves two goals: it stiffens the bass driver and prevents having a horn-shaped indent in the baffle so close to the midrange driver. This, according to Spendor, can actually colour the midband even though it applies to many three-ways that have been made in the past.

In terms of drive, the decent sensitivity (90dB) combined with an impedance that

doesn't drop below four ohms makes this a relatively easy load. However, it makes sense to arm yourself with an amp carrying at least 50 stiff watts under the bonnet, if only to keep the bass in line.

SOUND QUALITY

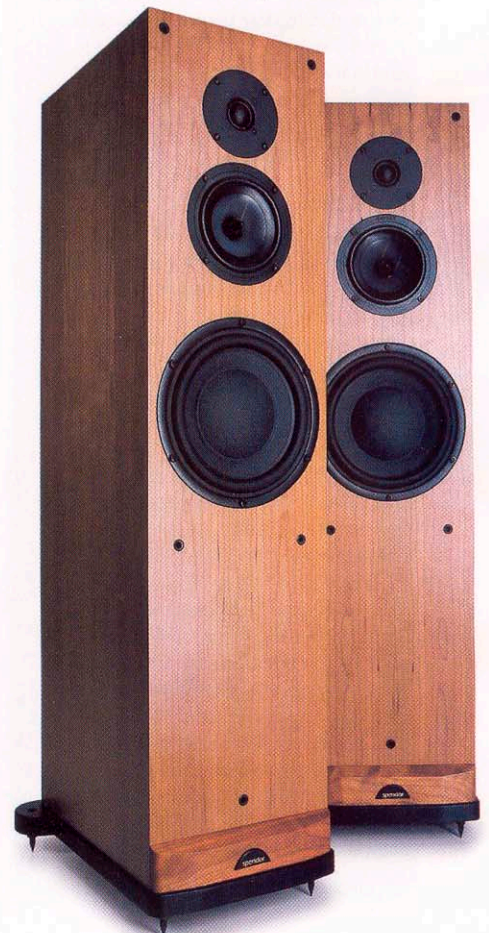
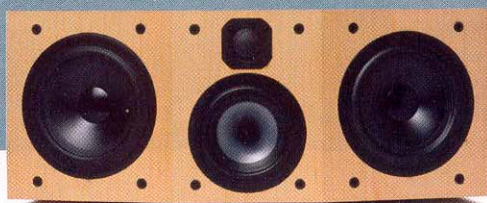
It is easy to appreciate the quality and extension of low frequencies on offer with the S9e – it has more oomph than most and we mean that in the nicest possible way. You hear loads of bass detail that usually remains at a much lower level, the thump of a musician's foot on the studio floor being a classic example on Terry Callier's vintage *New Folk Sound* album. (At least, we think it's a musician's foot – it isn't exactly an audiophile recording!) Another murky mix was found on Jeff Beck's *Truth*, where Rod Stewart sings *Shape Of Things To Come*. Yet with a speaker that has this much midrange transparency the quality of the music shines through and lets you enjoy a classic performance from a great band that could've been.

The more precise tones of Brand X's *Disco Suicide* served to reveal the potential for ▶

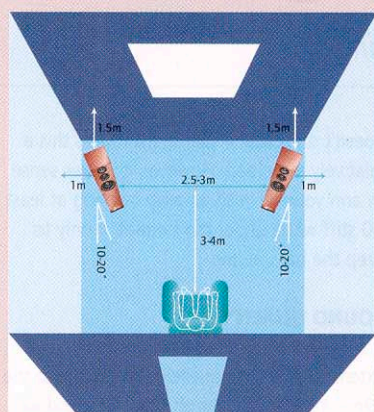
MAKING IT MULTICHANNEL

Spendor makes a centre channel speaker specifically to match the S9e called the C9e, and while its driver complement may not be exactly the same as the floorstander, it matches it in the most important area – the midrange. The C9e is a horizontal, three-way design with the same 27mm fabric-domed tweeter and 140mm polymer-coned midrange driver as the S9e – where it differs is in the use of twinned 168mm polymer-coned bass drivers. In bandwidth terms it covers the same spectrum, extending to 40Hz in the bass, but rather than use a 3D linear flow port Spendor has made this a sealed box, presumably to give greater flexibility of siting. As a result, sensitivity is lower at 88dB but the load is actually easier with a minimum of five ohms.

These speakers will sound as similar as such dissimilar cabinets can. The ideal for multichannel music would be to buy five S9es, but the C9e is a practical solution for big, powerful, Spendor-based surround.



SET-UP



POSITIONING

Spendor says that siting a pair of these speakers near to side and rear walls will not affect bass quality, since the port system is placed so close to the floor. However, you can't get around the fact that boundaries always have a reinforcing effect on the bass and we found that they actually needed plenty of space to breathe. We had to leave at least a metre between the speakers and side/rear walls, though Spendor recommends that you avoid having a similar distance to these boundaries as this will increase bass reinforcement.

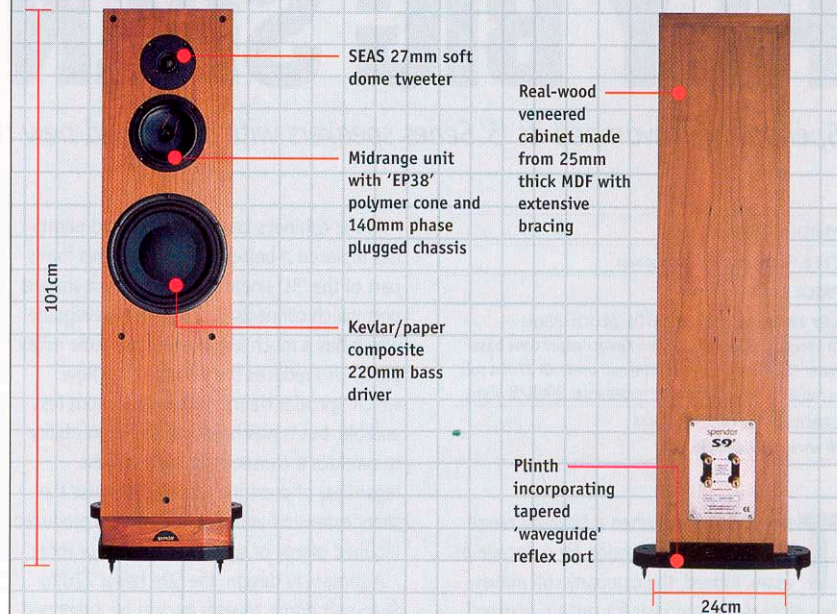
Because the S9e has a good, even on-axis balance, best results are achieved if you toe both speakers in so that they face the listening position and place them as wide apart as your listening room will practically allow, albeit not so wide that you lose the central image. Use the hefty spikes and lock rings provided to anchor the speakers to the floor, and avoid suspension bases such as the Townshend Seismic plinths because the extra height affects the way the port works.

SYSTEM MATCHING

While the S9e has high sensitivity and offers a pretty manageable load (with a minimum impedance of 4 ohms), its prodigious bottom end does require a bit of grunt if it's to remain tight and tuneful. As a starting point we'd recommend the Rotel RA-1062 (£595), a very fine amp for the money. It has bags of power – we measured 95 watts per channel – and combines this with a full-scale sound that should help counter the S9e's inclination to keep things to itself. This, mixed with its unmistakably powerful, purposeful and crisp sound should make it a great choice.

If the budget will stretch further, AVI's Laboratory Series Type S21 MI (£1,399) is a powerful integrated with real finesse, but one which produces a full scale sound in all respects. Sonically it's extremely clean, which is a good idea with this degree of transparency, and it has a fabulous turn of speed which should help inject a bit more spring into the Spendor's step. Other more costly recommendations include ATC's SIA2-150 (£2,375), Krell's KAV0400xi (£2,698) and the Exposure, Primare and Quad pre/power amps in this issue's *Ultimate Group Test*.

Detail



"Its sense of bass grip and revealing, natural midrange are what make the S9e special."

girth exhibited by the Spendors, the weight and control of bass guitar, drum and synth balanced perfectly by a clean and extended treble, with cymbals particularly well served. As well as being tonally impressive, this is also a very composed speaker – Brand X's jazz/rock can get a little dense at times but the S9e keeps things flowing smoothly and coherently, however intense the playing.

However, it could be a tad faster – timing is a bit on the relaxed side and transients don't have quite the attack they might. This was more obvious on some tracks than others though, with the Cinematic Orchestra's *Man With A Movie Camera* revealing all its majesty. This often sounds a bit bass-heavy and thick – here we got full bass depth and power from the big kick drum and synth, yet it was also open and expansive, letting the snare snap along nicely while the rest of the instrumentation built the bigger sonic picture.

HIM, the experimental, as opposed to the goth rock band, likewise seemed at home with the easy, relaxed yet revealing nature of this speaker, the bass and guitar lines revealing a fluidity and weight that other speakers struggle to imitate. Richard Thompson's less than dulcet tones were not disguised but neither was his sparkling acoustic guitar, both having considerable presence and palpability, with the kick drum shifting some genuine air in the act of underpinning his efforts.

These big cabinets have a bit more difficulty than their more fashionable competitors when it comes to creating a big image and there are times when the sound doesn't fully escape the box. Still, they produce high levels of

detail across the band and are extremely neutral, which means that whatever you play gets a chance to sound as it should. They are particularly adept with voices, with everyone from Slim Shady to Norah Jones revealing their full range, be that in terms of fluency of delivery with the former or dynamic range with the latter. In both cases there was a lot of subtlety revealed, with extra depth of tone and thus realism in the room.

The sense of grip in the bass combined with a revealing and very natural midrange make this a special speaker at a reasonable price. It may be a little bulky for some but the rewards produced by the impressive bass driver are worth any potential spouse hassle required to get them into the living room! **HFC**

Jason Kennedy

VERDICT

SOUND >>> 86%



EASE OF DRIVE >>> 84%



BUILD >>> 88%



VALUE >>> 83%



PRO

A combination of transparent midrange and treble with open, extended bass that is uncommon. Works equally well at high or low levels.

CON

The relaxed nature of this speaker means that it doesn't have the speed that others can produce, while the cabinets are a little big and square to image perfectly.

CONCLUSION

Spendor has managed to produce a more capable and enjoyable speaker than the previous S9. Very entertaining at high levels, it has fabulously open and weighty bass, but watch out for those room modes!

HI-FI CHOICE
OVERALL SCORE >>> **85%**