

Perfect Performer...

The Spendor SA1 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

I first encountered the Spendor SA1 at the time when the company's largest product, the SP100R Monitors arrived for review. MD Philip Swift just happened to have a pre-production pair in the car and a sneak preview combined with a sore back all led me to question the sanity of agreeing to live with a pair of loudspeakers the size of an average garden shed, particularly after hearing what these little boxes, which are about twenty times smaller in volume, could do. Not that I regret for one minute having the 100's (or the 'gentle giants' as they have become known) on hand as there are often times when I have a genuine requirement for a full bandwidth loudspeaker capable of high volume levels. But perhaps not surprisingly (considering the family connections) I find that the diminutive SA1 shares a lot of the attributes of its much larger brother, with a certain charm of its own that goes to make it extremely easy and enjoyable to listen to.

With Roy's review in issue 60 covering the mechanical background regarding these loudspeakers I do not need to go into detail about their construction. Suffice to say that the dimensions are immediately appealing and small enough to be regarded as a miniature, while the deeply lacquered wood finish has a luxurious quality that even I found quite attractive, a little reminiscent of a musical instrument. But as someone who prefers the austerity of black where possible the matching stands proved just a bit

too much for me, and while I have no question over their effectiveness, I opted to use the SA1's on a pair of light but rigid Foundation 'crows foot' supports instead.

While not wishing to reiterate Roy's comments regarding the original SA1 which was around over twenty years ago, I cannot help but agree on its capabilities, and personally feel



that it was often overlooked on the basis of being related to the BC1 which many regarded as a 'classical music only' (read; fuddy duddy) loudspeaker in the mould of the original Quad electrostatic, which it certainly wasn't in terms of its performance. While essentially neutral, it avoided the over

equalised sound of the LS3/5A and it's polar opposite the Linn Kan, which was brash, coloured and quite often ill-mannered, but more to the point the Spendor had most of the refinement of the BBC design with a lot of the life and dynamics of the little Linn. The new version is a shade smaller than its predecessor, but continues the Spendor tradition of using a plastic coned bass-mid driver of their own manufacture, coupled with a soft dome HF unit of Norwegian origin in a thin walled critically damped cabinet. Unlike so many small loudspeakers that utilise ports to extend the bass response (with often dubious results) the SA1 is an infinite baffle design that might not screw the last bit of bass weight out of a small cabinet, but offers a more predictable bottom end response. In practice, it meant the Spendor was unfussy about room positioning, working well in a small space and against the wall where the bass was reinforced without cluttering the mid range, a factor which I would imagine has to be a priority for any speaker of this size. Which is important, as the mid range is particularly clean and informative, conveying a great sense of detail and space with the ability to project away from the cabinets in the way that good small speakers (should) find very easy compared to bigger designs. It also blends pretty seamlessly with the top end, which is again informative without drawing attention to itself, fast and open but never aggressive. With a quoted sensitivity ►

▶ of 85dB they need a reasonable amount of power to get them going, but like most of the current Spendor range, have a kind impedance curve that doesn't place great demands on the amplifier. While I don't think that the sub fifteen Watts of something like a leak stereo 20 would wake them up, I had great success with the Radford

pretty loud, and given the grip of a suitably powerful amplifier such as the Bryston 14B SST (500-ish Watts per channel) or Naim NAP 300 (not quite as absurdly well endowed) responded by revealing a more wild and unreserved side to their character, managing a very respectable degree of authority and impressive dynamics with both rock and orchestral music. And no, I didn't burn any drive units out.

(Which is always a danger of using monster power amps with small loudspeakers...*) It is a rare

octave, even having listened to the album previously on the much wider bandwidth S100's. I think it is the sense of coherence that the Spendor's manage to achieve that makes this possible, and although it should be less of a challenge with a small box it is surprising just how many designs miss the mark in this respect. It is also telling that I have been in no hurry to move the bigger loudspeakers back in to the listening room.

I have also recently been using the SA1's as near fields on a couple of mixing projects with great success, where I have found them to be both revealing and informative of subtle changes within a mix while allowing long sessions of monitoring without stress or headache. It was in this situation that a number of people commented on just how life like voices sounded, which considering that only five minutes previously they had been listening to the real thing, is praise indeed.

I have always had a bit of a thing for small, perfectly formed objects, and loudspeakers are no exception. The SA1 fits that bill very nicely, but is also one of the few compact designs that doesn't seem to compromise musical enjoyment. If for some reason I found that I had to move into a smaller listening room, the diminutive SA1 would be right at the top of my list of desirable speakers. ▶+



STA25 at forty Watts per channel, and was able to generate surprisingly high levels where the bass remained punchy, tuneful and in keeping with the rest of the performance. There is enough of the LS35/A character to make tube heads go weak at the knees, with a beautiful liquid – or should that be creamy – midrange that really does it for voices and similar instruments, and a soundstage where you can wade in and be indulgent. It helps that there is little or no energy below about 50Hz, but the SA1's do a great job of convincing you that they go much lower than they really do. The fact that they are quite happy against a wall is a bonus, and the fall off is extremely gentle and even which means you are never that aware of the lower limits.

But despite their small size and gentlemanly heritage, they will go

thing for me to be listening to a small loudspeaker and not crave the missing extension and weight at the bottom end, but the SA1's somehow manage to give you the impression of a complete performance by letting the music grab your attention rather than the system and any shortcomings. Clichéd I know, but I was listening to a disc by Icelandic singer Emiliana Torrini and it struck me that at no time was I aware of the lack of a bottom

* Was that a dig? Ed.

Prices: £1100 pr.
Matching Stands: £400 pr.

Manufacturer:
Spendor Audio systems Ltd
Tel. (44)(0)1323 843474
Net. www.spendoraudio.com