

# Spendor S3e Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Not so long ago, the high-quality stand mount seemed like an endangered species. The likes of the SL600 were long gone and the market had swung decisively in favour of floorstanding cabinets with their cleaner aesthetic and lack of iron-mongery. Added impetus arrived with AV and its demands for greater efficiency and bass extension at the expense of quality. But in those last ten words lies the flaw in the fashion. Bigger volume delivers the extra bass and demands less power from the driving amplifier, but it brings bigger panels and a much livelier cabinet – with an independent spirit and a strong desire to sing along. The trouble is that, rather like the blustering Colonel Blimp character singing hymns in a Boulting brothers' comedy, it's tone deaf with absolutely no sense of rhythm.

In contrast, a small box benefits from inherently stiff panels, before you even start to brace it. The small driver and small, enclosed volume may not deliver massive bandwidth, but what does arrive is clean and precise. And while floorstanders have caught on to the benefits of narrow baffles, stiffness in those is even more important. The bottom line is very simple indeed: If you can't make a tall cabinet stiff it probably isn't worth making it at all. The fashion for cheap floorstanders is exactly that – a fashion. And just like flared trousers, they'll disappear in time (from the hi-fi arena at least) because as far as quality goes, there's no reason for them to survive. So perhaps the rejuvenation in the fortunes of stand-mounted miniatures should be seen as inevitable. Be that as it may, it doesn't alter the fact that these new Davids rising to face the established Goliaths have got

an uphill battle on their hands and a considerable point to prove.

Spendor's S3e is a perfect example of the breed. It's got all the fundamental elements that you'd expect, along with a few wrinkles all its own. Like the ProAc Tablette I reviewed in the last issue, the Spendor is also the latest in a long and illustrious line of such compact two-ways. Spendor were, after all, one of the original LS3/5a licensees, although in this case, the S3e is a larger speaker than the granddaddy of them all. Adopting the now standard 'deeper than it is wide' proportions keeps the frontal area small, although it lacks the pleasing balance of the tiny Tablette. Indeed, despite Spendor's exemplary standards of finish and quality veneers, the S3e does look a little drab when presented naked. Put

the subtly shaped grille back

on and they look a whole lot nicer. But the really clever bits in these speakers are beneath the skin.

The cabinet itself is constructed from 18mm MDF, which isn't unusual. What is unusual is the clever bracing. A substantial circumferential brace runs around the cabinet at two-fifths height, wedged up against the rear of the bass driver's motor, but separated from it by a thin damping pad. This is designed to anchor the driver against the rear and side panels without feeding spurious energy back into it. Theoretically that should make for better, crisper dynamics due to the stable mounting of the driver, while the decoupling should take the edge off of cabinet induced smearing and intermodulation distortion. A similar approach is employed with the tweeter, but this time the clamping is delivered by a lateral cross brace. Finally, a full width slot port is positioned at the bottom of the rear panel, its upper element providing yet another lateral brace. The end result is a cabinet that is both stiff and (from the drivers' point of view) inert, without resorting to massive amounts of weight or overbuilding. It's a carefully struck balance that's reflected in the S3e's sound.

The crossover and terminals are executed with similar care. The network itself is constructed from selected components and materials with no series resistors for gain adjustment and to rob the music of energy. The circuit is mounted on a block of MDF which spaces it from the stainless steel terminal plate, reducing the influence of eddy currents (although not between the terminals themselves) the whole lot being clamped together by the



▶ binding posts. Along with a damping layer this construction creates a solid block that helps eliminate vibrational interference as well as flexing in the terminal plate. The bi-wired terminals themselves are substantial five-way designs, with an external clamp so that 4mm plugs connect directly to the post rather than via the threads of the locking section. The whole shebang is held securely in place by a quartet of allen bolts. So, nothing fancy, but plenty of attention to all the little details that matter.



Which brings us, finally, to the drivers employed by the S3e. The 140mm bass-mid unit delivers the lion's share of the music and gets the lion's share of the engineering. A nicely executed injection moulded basket supports a synthetic rubber roll surround that terminates an ep38 polymer cone. The increasingly common bullet-shaped phase plug puts in an appearance here too, and the complex magnet assembly is of course, shielded. The voice coil assembly and surrounding elements

are carefully arranged to allow decent excursion and good heat dissipation, the latter improving power handling. The tweeter is a 27mm soft-dome design, its Sonolex diaphragm backed by a vented pole piece and a substantial motor assembly. Acoustic damping in the rear chambers minimises rear reflections and lowers the fundamental

resonance to extend the useable bandwidth. Don't confuse that with the first break-up mode of the diaphragm, where the higher you can push it the better.

The whole package delivers 86dB efficiency and -3dB points at 60Hz and 20kHz. The -6dB low-frequency corner is reached at 48Hz while impedance is 8 Ohms average and 6.8 Ohms minimum. It's a nicely chosen balance of reasonably easy drive and decent extension from the compact box. I used the S3es on a pair of IF Designs stands, well spaced out from rear and side-walls. I drove them with the 100 Watt Hovland RADIA which is towards the upper end of their power handling (and definitely the

upper end of the acceptable budget). Cabling was, as always, the Nordost Valhalla, while the Wadia 861SE and Clearaudia Master Reference fed the Tom Evans phono and line stages. I also used the Levinson 383, but more of that later.

With the S3es hung on the end of the big system, their strengths are immediately apparent. They combine a classically neutral mid-band with a surprisingly extended bass to create a remarkably coherent picture. As such they deliver a fascinating contrast to the ProAc Tablette that I reviewed last issue. More transparent and with better separation than the smaller speaker, the Sendor is more of a thoroughbred and less of an all-rounder. It delivers what is arguably a more revealing performance but across a narrower dynamic and musical spectrum.

Let's start with the bass, which is impressively extended and even, suggesting that Sendor have got their port spot on. Whilst it lacks weight and real fundamental substance (it IS only a small speaker) the texture and deftness of the low frequencies makes bass both informative and satisfying, whilst its speed and transparency ensures that things are kept moving along. Not the sort of chopped, forced rhythm and drive of a classic flat-earth system, but honest-to-God pacing, spacing and attack. Bass notes have shape and sustain – tails as well as leading edges. It makes for an involving yet relaxed presentation that pulls you into the wonderfully natural and open mid-band. Voices are particularly inviting, well separated and with real character. Aimee Mann is instantly recognizable when she's 'Lost In Space', while Eliza ▶

► Gilkyson's rye double entendres hit their mark on 'One Man Woman' and 'Wonderland'. The S3e effortlessly unraveled the sense behind these lyrics, yet did so without spotlighting or exaggerating the vocal. The balance between Gilkyson's voice and her complex yet spartan backing is perfect, as is the carefully structured arrangement of each set-piece.

This overall coherence is what binds the Spondor's sound together: transparency, separation and detail are double-edged swords, especially when they appear in concert. The S3e manages to maintain a proper sense of proportion (in every sense). So much so that occasionally they startle you. Playing the Dvorak *Cello Concerto* (Gregor Piatigorsky on Living Stereo) I was astonished by a bow striking a music stand as a page is turned. Clearly wood on metal, it's so alien that it stands out like a sore thumb – just as jarring, in fact, as it would be in real life. Likewise, Piatigorsky's breathing, which intrudes to a far greater extent than I'd ever previously noticed, simply because it is so clear and so clearly out of place.

The important thing here is to get this in context, and to do so means appreciating just where this speaker draws the line. Which is easy: Play the Dvorak, with its stunning climaxes at something approaching serious levels and two things happen when the going gets tough. The little Spondor doesn't exactly protest, but it lets you know about the strain you're placing on its physical integrity (and ultimate health). It also starts to get congested, and the mid-band shuts down really quite quickly as it approaches the edge of the dynamic envelope. Which is of course, exactly where the little Tablette impresses.

The Spondor offers a superbly cultured and capable mid-band, underpinned by a beautifully judged and weighted bass. It's crossover and cabinet are essentially invisible, as are the speakers on well-recorded material.

And this remains true as long as you don't open the window too wide – qualitatively or dynamically. The problem with the likes of the Vibe and the RADIA is that they entice the S3e into overreaching itself. However, used in even slightly less exalted company you'll likely never discover (or never notice) the point where it starts to all unravel: Which is where the 383 comes in. Similarly coherent, it carefully circumscribes its dynamic and



information envelope, ensuring that it keeps everything well under control. Hooking up the little Spondor makes for instant satisfaction and a confidence inspiring security. The combination simply puts the music first while succeeding in avoiding drawing any attention to itself. It's transparent enough to convince, dynamic enough to keep you from noticing what's missing, especially at the bottom-end that has an unquestioning rightness about it.

Of course, the Levinson is far from cheap (as well as far from available) and

I'd love to hear these on the end of something like the superb little Sugden a21 integrated amp. I suspect that the end result might be both deliciously liquid and wide, wide open, making it far greater than the sum of its parts.

This is a classic small monitor design. Natural and informative enough not to embarrass that oft-abused moniker, you can't afford to take liberties with the S3e, either when it comes to partnering equipment or the volume control. Their exquisite attention to detail is amply reflected in their sound. They demand similar care from the end-user in order to deliver their best. Understand what they're about and they'll respond with a remarkably satisfying performance – just don't ask them to step outside their chosen ground. Small but perfectly formed is a horribly overused phrase when it comes to hi-fi, but the S3e actually deserves the epithet. Once you appreciate what's gone into the insides it's easier to understand the quality of what comes out. It all makes perfect sense – which sums things up nicely: physically and sonically! ➤+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stand-mounted, two-way reflex
Drive Units:	
High Frequency –	27mm coated fabric dome
Low Frequency –	140mm ep38 polymer cone
Sensitivity:	86dB
Impedance:	80 Ohms (6.8 minimum)
Bandwidth:	60Hz - 20KHz $\pm$ 3dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	165x340x260mm
Finishes:	Cherry, Maple, Rosewood, Black Ash
Price:	£795

**Manufacturer:**  
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