

civil society

The spiritual successor to the BC1, Spendor's S6e is one of the most accomplished 'affordable high end' loudspeakers to emerge from this country in the past decade, says David Price...

Can one ascribe national characteristics to hi-fi products? Well, just as German cars are extremely well engineered but largely devoid of character and Italian ones pretty to a fault but often flaky, I truly believe that Spendor's S6e loudspeaker couldn't come from any other nation but this. Interesting is the fact that Philip Swift is now at the helm of Spendor. He's the quiet, affable and down to earth man who's most famous for his range of electronics that took the nineties hi-fi scene by storm – Audiolab. There's a lot of that company's philosophy in this speaker. It's conscientiously and thoroughly engineered (with lots of impressive detail touches), gracefully styled (by Allen Boothroyd - the man behind Meridian's arresting visual language) and sober yet immensely capable sounding (more so, I reckon, than any Audiolab product ever was).

The cabinets don't attempt any fancy curvatures (real or imagined – as certain sleekly radiused designs are boxes inside!). Rather, they're robustly put together, beautifully veneered and conventionally shaped affairs, housing a tweeter and mid/bass unit, and a clever downward firing port. The drive unit complement comprises a 180mm bass-mid drive unit and 27mm tweeter. The former SD-18A driver sports a new polymer (ep38) cone, claimed to have a high stiffness to mass ratio whilst providing excellent internal damping properties. A profiled phase plug is claimed to improve linearity and dispersion characteristics compared to a conventional dustcap. Both the pole plate and top plate are black plated to draw heat away from the voice

coil, which increases the dynamic range and headroom of the bass unit by reducing thermal compression distortion, and there's a non-resonant, profiled, high rigidity cast aluminium alloy chassis.

The Spendor 27mm tweeter sports a brand new Sonolex material claimed to have a very low density whilst providing excellent internal damping properties and highly consistent performance. The crossover boasts low-loss components with OFC copper wire-wound inductors with cores and flanges manufactured from high purity compressed iron powder bonded with small amounts of isolating material. These alternative magnetic materials are said to achieve very high saturation levels and very linear magnetic characteristics even at large operating currents. Polypropylene capacitors and high power ceramic resistors are used, the latter only in parallel damping applications, so there are no series gain adjustment resistors – Spendor claiming that resistor non-linearity and dynamic compression effects are eliminated. All level adjustment within the crossover is achieved with tapped inductor 'auto-transformers' which are designed and manufactured in-house by Spendor.

SOUND QUALITY

As I said in the preamble, plug the S6es into your system and the chances are you might be just a tad underwhelmed. These are the least 'showy' sounding loudspeakers I've heard that have been designed in the last two decades. The likes of Mission have set a precedent in speaker voicing which gives a bright, bold and commanding sound that's brilliant in the showroom (I call in evidence the



782SE, your honour) yet can be less than easy to live with. These Spondors are the opposite. Listened to cold, and with little attention paid to matching, placement or set-up, they're simply a tad over warm and lacklustre. Half an hour spent moving them around, getting the cables and/or source components right and the spikes nicely bedded in – and the picture changes profoundly.

I used the S6es with Musical Fidelity amplification – both the X-P200s in monobloc mode and the

ticated tonality of the mid-bass unit.

Move to some acoustic jazz from Miles Davis ('So What') and these loudspeakers truly excel – as they're able to demonstrate their excellent tonal accuracy. Double bass sounds like double bass, trumpets like trumpets, hi-hats like hi-hats. You don't get the impression that you're listening to a tonally dry loudspeaker that's been voiced that way to give it speed. To its eternal credit, the S6e takes you closer to the respective textures of the different instruments,

it might seem (actually it's barely an issue at all even at this price) and the whole is even greater than the sum of the parts. This loudspeaker is brilliantly integrated and remarkably cohesive (even at high volumes – it only gets shouty when you're putting hundreds of watts into it) and always seems so together – rhythmically, texturally and tonally. So well integrated and harmonious are its respective bits that its failings (and every speaker has them, oh yes!) almost never intrude.

CONCLUSION

So I liked it – does it show? Here's a brilliant music making package. Its couch, even and refined balance makes it best with acoustic jazz and classical music – but it's so well designed that it will happily play rock or electronica with the same insouciance. Whatever you listen to, this is loudspeaker that's capable far beyond its price and should delight all comers. Truly, the best of British.



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mighty kW500 – plus my beloved tweaked World Audio K5881 tube power amp (with MF Audio Passive Pre). With QED XT-400 loudspeaker cables and the S6es about 30cm to the rear wall, they sang. Or rather they didn't – what they did do was provide an extremely even-handed and open window on the music with none of the dry, acerbic, forward, distortion-fuelled zing of so many other rivals. Nor did they serve up bass boom that apparently adds weight but in truth kills speed – despite their innate warm-side-of-neutral tonality, they never sounded slow or ponderous. What they offer is an unusual – almost unique, even – combination of speed, grip and transparency allied to most 'benevolent' tonality (they're not going to strip your paint, or rebores your inner ear canals...)

Somewhat mischievously, I decided to kick off the listening session with Inner City's 'Good Life', a classic house tune from 1988 and most certainly not what many – I suspect – Spondor customers would naturally listen to. The S6e surprised with an extremely engaging and musically satisfying rendition of this synthesiser-rich track. Bass was tight and tuneful, and integrated seamlessly with an open and even midband that – despite its obvious smoothness – was satisfyingly detailed and open. The Spondors didn't half image – they disappeared into the recorded acoustic, pushing the vocal forward and above the plane of the speakers with tremendous precision. Yet tonally, never did they sound hard or acerbic – something I can't say about many price rivals. Treble was impressive too – decently spacious and airy, with a smooth nature that integrated perfectly with the sophis-

yet still maintains an impressive turn of speed. Likewise, its stereo imaging is never less than excellent – generally, instruments hang back behind these boxes, but the S6e can't half push a solo instrument or lead vocal out into the room when called upon so to do. And whenever this is, you just know it's not going to hurt...

Dynamics are excellent too – although it lacks sledgehammer bass and the ability to move vast amounts of air, it never sounds strained or compressed. The kW500 gave it a right pummeling, and the S6e never really complained. Of course, you'll find more physically commanding designs, but not at (or near) this price. And all the time, its innate musicality shone through. It truly sang with my tube amp at lowish volume levels, but I couldn't help but get the impression that this floorstander likes a good, clean, powerful transistor amplifier to 'bring it out of itself'.

The downsides of the S6e are few. Treble is just a tad veiled – it doesn't have the sheen and almost ethereal spaciousness of a good ribbon tweeter, such is that fitted to Elac's FS207.2. Nor does the bass have the motive power of rival floorstanding designs – with a razor-sharp 'on-off' feel. This is actually less of the problem than

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

Like an increasing number of floor-standing rivals the S6 uses a floor sited port that drives a room's vertical resonant mode most efficiently. For a 9ft ceiling this ensures a goodly amount of 60Hz bass, the exact frequency most music producers use to tiddle up bass in a recording. The port is tuned lower, peaking at roughly 35Hz, but is only a few dB down at 60Hz so it will provide plenty of output at this frequency. Since the S6 also has a flat forward response down to 40Hz it doesn't lack bass and should in practice go low and sound quite fast.

A peak in port output corresponds to a dip in forward response at 500Hz, pointing to a box effect that may be audible as a small amount of colouration. Otherwise, the S6 has a fairly smooth response characteristic that, as usual with Spondor, rolls down slowly and smoothly at high frequencies. The roll down is judiciously applied to ensure the S6 will sound clear and detailed, but not hard or sharp. Spondors are usually easy on the ear, but also accurate – and the S6 follows this pattern.

Impedance is very high at 9ohms across the audio band. It only drops to 6ohms from 10Hz - DC. Sensitivity was a reasonable 86dB all the same, so the speaker is a easy load.

The S6 is a nicely balanced loudspeaker with plentiful bass, accompanied by a smoother, softer delivery than is common nowadays. NK

VERDICT

Supremely capable loudspeaker offers sophistication and musicality in equal measure. A stand-out product at the price that should win a great many friends.

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