

EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Spendor A9 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

Some reviews almost write themselves. Tannoy's are fun, Wilsons sound big and Spendor... well, Spendor comes from the 'pipe and slippers' end of the market. Job done, who needs to open the box? Unfortunately, loudspeakers like the A9 make the reviewer's life that bit more complex, because they don't adhere to our perceived opinion about Spendor loudspeakers. No pipes. No slippers... just a really good, honest loudspeaker.

The A9 is a slim three-way floorstander, with the two 180mm Kevlar composite cones with long-throw motors acting together, coupled with a 150mm midrange cone made from Spendor's own transparent ep38 polymer, and a 29mm fabric dome tweeter. The low and midrange units are Spendor's own designs, while the tweeter is outsourced, but built to exacting specs. It has to be; Spendor was one of the main protagonists of pair matching from its early days and these components need to be exact enough to allow a 1dB matching across the board. Irrespective of the pair matching requirement, the A9's tweeter has a deliberately irregular-shaped surround that it calls its 'bi-elliptical acoustic lens technology'; funky name aside, this does help improve horizontal dispersion and off-axis performance without messing up (or being messed up by) the midrange that sits below.

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The loudspeaker is somewhere between the thin-walled cabinet of old and a thicker-walled more modern design, and sports 'dynamic damping' at key points to reduce potential for the cabinet to sing along with the music. Cleverly, Spendor manages to kill several birds with one stone in the base-plate, as it combines the mounting bracket for the crossover, a rigid braced plate that can really grip a M8 spike or four and the base of the letterbox shaped 'linear flow' rear port. A single set of WBT terminals seal the deal.

It's all extremely elegantly finished and, though tall, doesn't look out of place. We are used to oversized base-plates to help lower the centre of gravity and this speaker looks a little odd without such a plate, but it's certainly adding to the clean lines of the design.

What the A9 does so well is to combine that BBC-speaker neutrality (only this time without a little upper-mid peak to make music sound just a shade 'better' than it really is) with a more



▶ exciting and dynamic presentation that modern audio demands. That's a tough balancing act; those who like their loudspeakers soft and 70s think modern speakers scream and squeak at them, while those more used to modern designs think those classic BBC models dull and flat-sounding. The A9 sails between these two waypoints beautifully.

This makes it a speaker for all seasons. I don't subscribe to the 'good for classical' or 'rock-ready' design schools, because a loudspeaker ought to be genre-agnostic. However, as the philosopher David Hume pointed out, there is a significant difference between the descriptive (what is) and the prescriptive (what ought to be), and in audio that means few loudspeakers are truly comfortable with everything from Palestrina to Pantera. The A9 is one of the exceptions. Its tonal balance and dynamic range benefit a huge range of musical styles and I threw everything from Bach's Mass in B Minor to Evil Nine at the speakers and they did well with every track.

The dynamic range was especially impressive, in that context. It is possible to make everything sound 'good' by slugging the dynamic range of the speaker. This results in a sense of being removed from the music; sounds happen around the loudspeakers across the room and your connection to the music is cerebral in nature. On the A9 however, the scale of the music snaps at your attention gland and you are in there with the music. Perhaps not in the 'red in tooth and claw' nature of some loudspeakers, but the A9 certainly makes a good balance between head and heart. This came across well with the Amadeus Quartet's rendition of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' string quartet, combining as the does the detail and imagery needed

to make a string quartet sound 'realistic' with the dynamic range and energy that makes you understand why they played the music in the first place. The same thing happens in reverse with ZZ Top's *Tres Hombres* album; you need that dynamic range to get the swampy groove across, but the fine detail and articulation mean you also understand what a track like 'La Grange' is all about.

If you come away from the last two paragraphs with the word 'balance', well done. Now add the word 'bass'. The A9 has quite a lot of it; not in a dubstep, wall-of-bass, gut-mangling onslaught way, but controlled,

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deep and precise manner. It's perhaps best geared for typical UK/EU rooms and might get a touch lost in a barn of a listening space, but under such circumstances the A9 will deliver a surprising amount of bottom end heft from what is a comparatively small package. OK, perhaps not enough to hit those 'end of the pedalboard' organ notes, but also not enough to swamp a typical UK room. So, perhaps 'balance' is appropriate here, too.

As you might expect given the Spendor heritage, detail and imaging are first rate. In bringing the Spendor sound into the second decade of the 21st Century, there was a risk that these important aspects of Spendor sound would be underrepresented, but fortunately this is something of a win-win. The A9 doesn't have its own hologram projector, but the image is wide of the boxes, and has good front-to-back stage depth. It doesn't bulldoze walls down, or give an artificially large soundstage, instead portraying a sound that is appropriate for the instruments or singer on the recording. Similarly, the level of detail is fine enough to pull hidden glories out of those grooves or digits, but not at the expense of a pinched, etched or topky sound quality.

An interesting detail about the A9 is its port. This is one of the least 'porty' sounding speakers around and the speaker sounds





almost as fast as a sealed enclosure, but without the concomitant sensitivity, impedance or bass-lightness issues such a box might bring. It's also rear firing but not room fussy, which further suggests the port is doing more to ease the loudspeaker load than acting as sonic reinforcement. This seriously helps make the case for the A9 with the speed metal merchants, because there's almost no bass lag blurring beats.

It would be a dereliction of duty not to find flaw in a product, but I admit to having something of a struggle on my hands here. The loudspeaker has a relatively low ceiling; it will play loud, but perhaps not loud enough for real headbangers, and at pain-levels it can harden up and sound shouty in the mids and beyond. At the other extreme, it does fairly well at low levels, but at whisper quiet moments, there is a slight loss of integration between the drivers. But this feels 'picky' to me; the sound is simply excellent under the conditions most people will use these speakers for most of their time.

A few issues back, I waxed lyrical about the Magico Q5. Sadly, not everyone has the amplifier girth, the room width or length or the wallet depth to cope with so demanding a £65,000 loudspeaker. What happens for the rest of us? The Spendor A9 happens. It gives you a lot of that Q5 sound for nigh on 1/13th the cost, and doesn't need a powerhouse amp or a stateroom to hold court. OK, if you were comparing the two side-by-side in the sort of environment that gives both an equal footing, you would quickly know why the extra money was justified (especially if you like to play loud and like your bass full-range) and where it had been deservedly spent. The point is, however, is not to criticise the Spendor for not being a £65,000 loudspeaker, but to highlight just how good you the A9 really is. Up against one of the high-end's latest big boys, the A9 really is the plucky little loudspeaker that could.

Sometimes as a reviewer, you happen across a product that ticks all the boxes and yet you have no qualms about giving it back at the end of the review period. The Spendor A9 is not that kind of product. It ticks all the boxes, yes, but also presents music with a charm and poise that is rare in audio of any price. That stays with you. I would imagine that in 20 years time, when all the shiny 'must have' loudspeakers of 2010 are long forgotten, there will still be a lot of people happily playing music through their Spendor A9s. That might just make it the best investment in audio around today; not just in future resale values, but because these are the sort of loudspeakers that get handed down from father to son. That's how good they are. +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Description: 3-way floorstanding loudspeaker

Enclosure type: Spendor linear flow reflex

HF drive unit: 29mm wide-surround dome with fluid cooling

MF drive unit: Spendor 150mm ep38 cone

LF drive units: Spendor 180mm Kevlar® composite cone

Sensitivity: 90dB for 1 watt at 1 metre

Crossover point: 500 Hz and 5.0 kHz

Frequency response: 50 Hz to 20 kHz ± 3dB anechoic

Typical in-room response: -6dB at 28 Hz anechoic

Impedance: 8 ohms nominal

Impedance minimum: 6.2 ohms

Power handling: 250 watts unclipped programme

Terminals: WBT 4 way binding posts single-wired

Dimensions (HxWxD): 103 x 20.5 x 36cm

Weight: 27kg each

Finish: black ash, cherry, light oak, wenge

Manufactured by Spendor Audio Systems Ltd

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