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Future Classic... The Spendor A6 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

One of the most enjoyable and engaging speakers to come our way last year was Spendor's diminutive SA1, a speaker that could and should finally banish the LS3/5a to the annals of history. But as wonderfully musical and lucid as the SA1 assuredly is, there's no escaping the limitations imposed by its tiny cabinet. Well, for those who fancy that unobstructed mid-band clarity and musical coherence, but allied to the greater weight, scale and authority that comes with increased bandwidth, Spendor offer the new A5 and A6 compact floorstanders. The new models replace the existing, well-regarded S series equivalents, bringing with them cleaner, sharper and more modern styling. But the changes here are far more than just skin deep. Both designs have been deliberately engineered to pass the signal as easily as possible, with minimum disturbance to the sense of musical flow.

The A6 is the larger of the two speakers, a straight two-way as opposed to the A5's two and a half way (based on smaller bass and bass/mid drivers), standing a moderate 875mm tall and only 192mm wide. The rectangular cabinet is simple yet elegantly proportioned, and beautifully finished in a choice of four real tree veneers. The carcass is constructed from 18mm MDF throughout, with critically placed circumferential braces to create a rigid structure without adding mass. Indeed, despite its rigid structure, the A6 only weighs 18kg – far lighter than you expect when you go to pick one up. The tweeter is the familiar Spendor version of the 29mm SEAS ring-radiator design, its faceplate enhanced by a

sophisticated elliptical wave-guide. The bass/mid unit uses an ep38 plastic cone built into a 170mm die-cast chassis, which operates up to a high 4kHz cross-over point. The drivers are carefully pair-matched for consistency.

Which brings us to the crossover itself, a key component in the speaker's design and thinking. The S6 was never a particularly awkward load, but Spendor were determined to improve matters still further, off-setting the A6's low-ish 86dB sensitivity by combining it with a flat, 8 Ohm impedance characteristic. The network itself uses hybrid second/third order slopes and is engineered to offer minimal phase shift and good impulse response as well as a smooth frequency balance. Overall phase coherence is a key aspect of Spendor designs, and the crossover is a critical contributor to this goal. But it's not just the design but the execution that's impressive. The circuit board is mounted into a substantial MDF tray that is inserted into the base of the speaker, forming the upper face of the rear mounted slot port that exits at the foot of the cabinet. This both braces the components and provides a firm mounting for the single pair of WBT binding posts, removing the need

for a terminal panel and the weakness it would introduce into the cabinet.

The base of the speaker (and its port) is formed by a separate slab, securely bolted to the bottom edges of the front and side panels. The wide mouth is devoid of wool or any other damping, as is the inside of the cabinet itself, inline with the policy of minimizing energy storage within the speaker system

and projecting musical energy into the room. A firm footing is also essential in this regard, and here the A6's solution is both unusual and extremely effective. Four, 40mm diameter and 5mm thick discs are firmly screwed to the corners of the speaker's base. The outer edges of these are drilled and tapped to receive 8mm spikes, offering both the widest possible footprint without resorting to outriggers, and an incredibly solid anchor for the spikes, against which the locking nuts can really be tightened home. The steel threads run very smoothly

too, making it really easy to adjust the speaker for a solid footing and perfect level. It's a far cry from the countersunk brass or alloy ferrules used by the competition and contributes to the A6's incredible stability and solid placement, despite its intentionally



► lightweight construction. This speaker is noticeably more rigidly coupled than nearly all others – so much so that you have to conclude that this factor contributes seriously to the superb sonic results.

Ooops – that rather let the cat out of the bag! Well, no use hiding it now; Spendor have got another special speaker on their hands. Crucially, what the A6 shares with the much smaller SA1, the quality that so impressed and engaged in the little standmount, is the unobstructive, free-flowing nature of its musical delivery.



Both these designs really allow the music to breathe, giving both dynamics and phrases proper shape and expressive weight. Of course, on the subject of weight, the incredibly lucid clarity that comes with the SA1's limited bandwidth can't be matched by the larger A6 with

it's deeper bass, but it's more than compensated for by the extra scale and more balanced presentation. With the SA1, as marvelous as it is, you can't ever forget the missing bottom octave, but the A6 does just enough to underpin the music in a more convincing fashion, removing the system even further from the experience.

Having lived with both these designs for quite some time, I feel that they represent a step change in quality over their predecessors.

In much the same way as the Avalon Isis, NP2.0 and Indra, or Focal's new Utopia series constitute a major advance for their respective producers, so too do these latest Spendor designs. What's more, all these speakers share two crucial features: remarkable top to bottom coherence, reflected not in the flatness of their frequency response, but

in the evenness with which they deliver musical energy across their bandwidth, and partly as a result, significantly improved naturalness – what might once have been termed neutrality before that term became so debased and contorted as to be almost meaningless. In this case, “musically natural” extends beyond tonality and harmonic balance (both of which are important) but into the arrival time, shape and duration of each note. It's what makes the NP2.0s association with its far more expensive brothers more than merely fanciful. It's what makes the

Living with the A6...

As well as the ease of maneuvering and getting the A6 perfectly vertical, the carefully engineered balance and beautifully executed rear port allow a remarkable range of placement possibilities, the speakers being surprisingly happy even quite close to the rear wall, seriously reinforcing their small room potential. Even the grilles have been carefully shaped to prevent constant spacing between the tweeter and their inner edge, an elliptical top to the cutaway passing unusually close to the dome to achieve superior performance. Even the grille structure has been cut back to save weight and reduce stored energy. Nothing has been left to chance or taken for granted. If advances in sound quality are the result of accumulated incremental development (well – it worked for British Cycling!) then the A6 is certain proof of that particular pudding.

A6 a very, very special speaker indeed.

How does it achieve this elusive goal? What's more, how does it do it from such a compact and affordable design? There are a number of contributing factors, and as always it's a case of balancing the whole equation, but there are certain features that stand out. Let's start with the bass/mid unit. Designed and built in-house by Spendor, they are not only engineered specifically for this purpose, but the company's extensive experience with the materials and technology involved allow them to produce the drivers with remarkable consistency, before further pair matching occurs. Nor is this merely anecdotal, as a destructive interlude with an SA1 bass unit recently proved. The repaired speaker fitted absolutely seamlessly back alongside its surviving twin, prolonged listening with mono material underlining just how consistent the performance of Spendor's drive units really is. Add in the low-loss/low-storage strategy and you have a speaker that belies its (extremely) modest sensitivity rating. The A6 might measure at 86dB, but it doesn't sound that way – at all. A string of visitors, hearing the speaker driven by the 40 or so valve Watts of the VAS Citation Sound 2 monos and asked ►

► to guess their efficiency regularly placed it above 90dB, fooled by the quickness and unimpeded agility of the sound, the crisp, sudden dynamics and easy, unforced immediacy.

A second factor is the speaker's natural tonality. First acquaintance might lead you to judge them as warm or rounded, but you'd be wrong, misled by their remarkable lack of edge or glare. It's undoubtedly down in part to the superior behavior of the drivers, but also reflects the ease with which the speaker is driven – and the subsequent lack of strain on the amplifier. Then there's the careful placement of the only mechanical damping in the design, a constrained layer between each driver and the baffle, helping to eliminate intermodulation distortion and the smearing it produces. The sound of the A6 is so easy and integrated, the musical picture so coherent, that it's easy to miss the level of resolution and detail on offer, simply because it's all where it should be – rather than sticking out like a sore thumb, disturbing the temporal and musical picture and drawing attention to itself in the process.

So play the incredibly transparent and natural Townes Van Zandt track 'Waitin' 'Round To Die' (from *Heartworn Highways*) and whilst the Spendor can't match the scale, absolute transparency and acoustic space of a speaker like the Isis or Martin Logan's astonishing CLX, it's remarkable how natural its perspective is, how easily placed and identified the many extraneous sounds are, from the muttered interjections and impromptu



backing vocals emanating from the far end of the room, to the dog howling in the yard. What's more, you can tell both the what and the why, the way TVZ's hangover recedes as he gets through the first chorus and comes

out the other side, the natural timing in the interplay between the people present.

A recording like *Heartworn Highways* will show you the soundstage limitations imposed by the A6's curtailed bandwidth – but only if you go looking for them. Likewise, large-scale orchestral works will reveal the limitations of the compact cabinet and single bass driver when it comes to really big dynamic swings – but only if you've heard something an awful lot bigger AND better (a surprisingly narrow field, believe me). Conversely, the intimacy and musical chemistry, rhythmic complexity and interplay of small group jazz can be absolutely breathtaking. Like the baby Avalons, the Spendor can undo much bigger and initially more impressive competitors by dint of its sheer musical coherence and direct communication. It just sounds like music, like people, like a band having fun – and a world away from the disjointed mess generated by so many expensive speaker systems.

Given the A6's ability to step back behind the music and allow the performers and performance to speak for themselves, it should come as no surprise to learn that it responds magnificently to being fed a better, and particularly a more coherent signal.

If ever a speaker existed to justify the "foundations first" policy of paying attention to your cable loom and supports to maximize the performance of modest but well-designed electronics, then this is it. To say that the A6/VAS combination punches above its weight is an understatement of almost heroic proportions. Deliver a clean feed and the results are simply staggeringly engaging and enjoyable. Outings with other amps proved just as successful, although the Spendor also proved remarkably revealing of changes upstream, in both electronics and set up. But when you get it right, and they will point you in the right direction and let you know when you get there, these speakers will bring real, live, breathing music into your home – just like hi-fi is supposed to. Spendor's often forgotten reputation for engineering innovation is clearly in safe hands, with products like the SA1 and A6 setting exacting new performance standards at their price points. Easy to use, easy to drive and easy to get the best out of, I love the A6s. They're GRRRRREAT! ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Two-way rear-reflex floorstander
Drivers:	1x 29mm fabric diaphragm ring-radiator 1x 170mm ep38 cone mid/bass
Crossover Point:	4kHz
Bandwidth:	58Hz – 20kHz ±3dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms
Sensitivity:	86dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	192 x 875 x 280mm
Weight:	18kg ea.
Finishes:	Light oak, cherry, wenge, black ash veneers
Price:	£1895

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