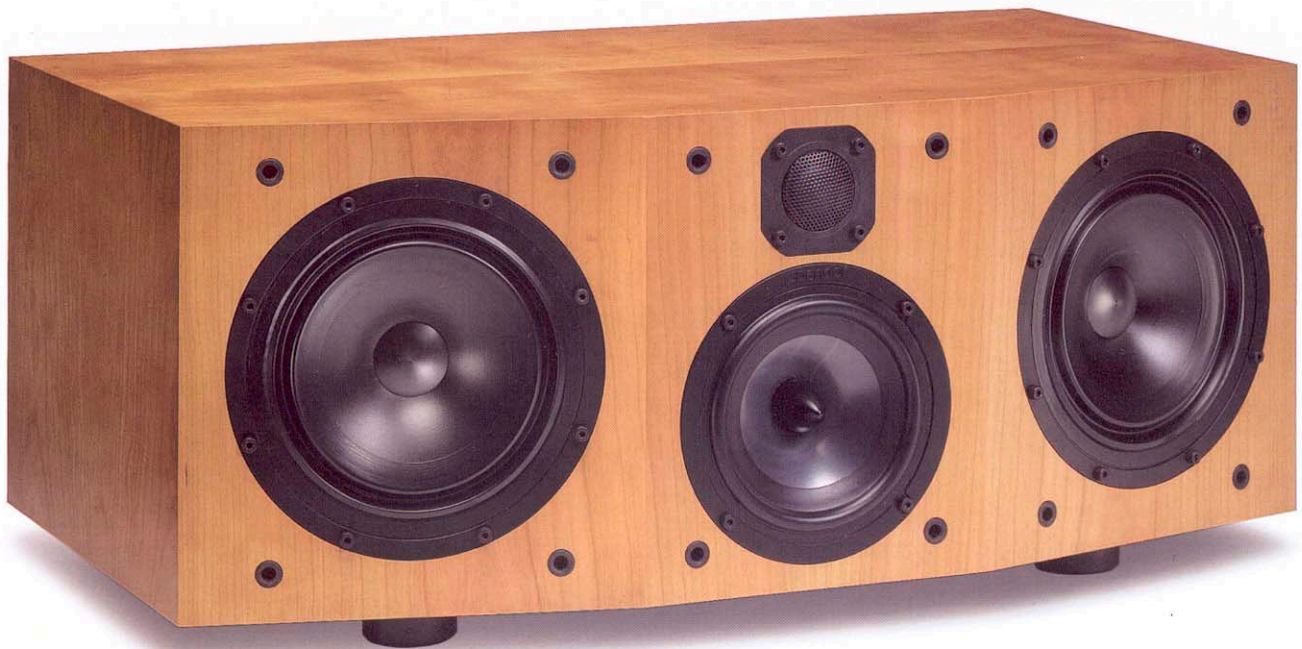




Five Spendor loudspeakers really do sound better than one

The name of Spendor is well known to hi-fi enthusiasts for its loudspeakers which have always produced an accurate and convincing reproduction of music recordings. Indeed we reviewed the company's S6e model a few months ago and were very impressed with both its construction and its sound quality. But can they deliver the same quality to a home cinema system? To find out the answer we put together a full five-channel system with a Denon receiver; a Runco projector; a REL sub-woofer, a Pioneer DVD player; a Projecta screen and by the time we'd realised that Robert was my mother's brother we had a superb home cinema running. The picture quality was absolutely stunning but did the sound system live up to all our expectations?



For our system Spendor put together a pair of their S8e 2-way floor-standers for the front channels; one of their 3-way C9e centre channel speakers and a pair of their SR5 on-wall surround loudspeakers. All were finished to a high standard in a simply gorgeous real wood cherry veneer. The Spendor S8e is the next size up from the S6e previously tested yet it still manages to look slim and elegant. It is a heavy loudspeaker that sits solidly onto the floor courtesy of the clever "outrigger" plinth which is integrated into the cabinet's structure and supports the whole loudspeaker assembly on four steel spikes. The cabinets are strongly built from veneered MDF panels, with plenty of internal bracing, and incorporate one of Spendor's ingenious ports in the form of a slot between the cabinet "base" and the plinth. This so-called "3D linear flow port" ensures a low pressure loading and hence a freedom from the extraneous port noises and the asymmetrical loading problems which afflict so many designs which use nothing more sophisticated than a length of plastic pipe.

The 210 mm (or 8 inch) bass/mid-range drive-unit has specially profiled magnet pole-pieces which are expensive to make but which reduce the harmonic distortion, particularly at higher levels and so produce a much cleaner transparent sound. The cone is formed from a new polymer material (ep38) said to be extremely stiff yet have good internal damping. The stiffness is required to reproduce the bass notes accurately whilst the internal damping

helps suppress the colourations which can muddle the mid-band sounds. The soft-domed tweeter is a complex unit which incorporates such features as the rear venting of the dome into a damped chamber so increasing the dynamic range of the system whilst avoiding much of the compression so many systems suffer from. This technique also lowers the fundamental resonance of the tweeter; and in real terms that means it can be used over a wide band of frequencies without any danger of stimulating a nasty peak in the response. All features that again aid a clean open sound.



The two units are connected together by a crossover network made from components of excellent quality. The inductors are wound using oxygen-free copper wire on high-purity compressed iron powder cores; so less distortion, even at high power levels and the capacitors are large polypropylene types which have a low dielectric "memory" and so largely free of the "smearing effect" that can degrade reproduction of high frequency sounds such as cymbals.

The C9e centre channel loudspeaker is a big system; much bigger than is commonly seen in British homes; so is there an element of overkill here? Well just think about it. In practice most of the movie sound-track tends to be reproduced by the centre speaker so why make it so much smaller than the left and right front speakers? In truth centre speakers have been made small to make them visually unobtrusive but if it's good sound you want, well the bigger the better. And this Spendor loudspeaker doesn't disappoint in the "Go on; impress me" department. It is actually a 3-way system with the two side drive-units being 6 inch (165 mm) woofers angled slightly outwards whilst the mid-band unit is a 5 inch (140 mm) unit using the same ep38 polymer cone material as all the Spendor cone drivers. This is important because it will help ensure that all the loudspeakers in the system have a similar sound to ensure what is called a uniform timbre throughout the surround system.

Continued on pg 32 →



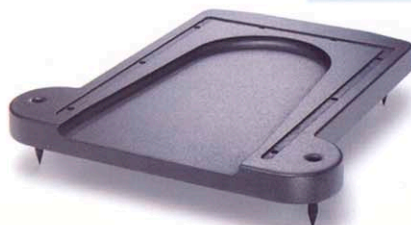
In other words an actor's voice will sound the same regardless of which speaker it is heard from. Finally the tweeter is a 25 mm soft fabric domed unit again with rear venting of the dome.

We've kept the really interesting product until last, namely the SR5 on-wall surround loudspeaker. A lot of people think that for the surround channels you can simply take reasonably good sounding small loudspeakers and hang them on the back or side walls of the room. If only it were that easy. Unfortunately a loudspeaker performs completely differently when it is in free space, say 15 inches or more from the rear wall, to when it is in half-space, with its back up against or close to the wall. Put a conventional loudspeaker up against the wall and the bass heard may seem louder but in fact the frequency response will now be all over the place with peaks and dips so that some bass notes are loud and others too soft. The effect is easy to show with a recording of a bass guitar being played right down through the musical scales. Each and every note should sound at the same volume. In contrast the SR5 has been designed only for wall mounting so its bass response is very controlled. The "purpose-made" design of this product is further displayed by the unusual shape of the cabinet which allows for either a "straight-on" mounting or an angling to one side using the supplied mounting bracket. This hefty stainless-steel bracket provides a really solid mounting structure yet has a polymer ring isolator attached at each end to isolate the sound vibrations from the wall (If the wall vibrates in sympathy with the sound output the overall sound will become muddled and distorted). The SR5 is a 2-way system and appears to use the same mid-band drive-unit and tweeter as the centre channel loudspeaker.



• Prices: Spendor S8e loudspeakers
 £1895.00 per pair
 Spendor C9e centre loudspeaker
 £1250.00 each
 Spendor SR5 surround loudspeaker
 £500.00 each
 System as tested
 £4145.00

We could see that a lot of intelligent thought has gone into the design and construction of these loudspeakers but would this translate into excellent sound quality? Well having recently tested the Spendor S6e model we were keen to hear what difference the extra £400 would deliver with the S8e so first we hooked these up to the same Quad and Marantz CD player/amplifier systems as we used before. Again we were immediately struck by the open and





revealing character of these loudspeakers; the way in which the soundstage has real depth and the layers of music can be heard with tremendous clarity. And again the bass was reproduced in a tight, controlled manner going down apparently to the deepest depths. The main difference that we could hear was that this model just produced more sound than the S6e. By that we don't mean it went louder, which actually it did; but that it seemed to have more dynamic range, going from the quieter sounds to very loud sounds with absolute freedom and an absence of anything "squashing" the sound.



We then set up the home cinema system described earlier and apart from adjusting the channel levels etc. using Denon's clever automatic system, we found that this system was surprisingly tolerant and we certainly didn't spend much time moving the speakers around the room. We put them where we thought they ought to go and everything just seemed to be well balanced from the off. Maybe the first impressions of this system might confuse some movie enthusiasts because it does sound rather different from a lot of the mid-range systems that might be heard in dealer's showrooms and at exhibitions. Such systems tend to have a fulsome sound with lots of weighty upper bass; perhaps what might be described as a warm, well rounded sound. Not so the Spendor system. As with its two channel sound character this is a system that doesn't seem to add much to the original recorded sound-track so it can seem very forceful particularly as transient sounds seem to come from nowhere. So the unexpected slam of

doors and pistol shots really can make you jump and sometimes even instinctively duck! Once you come to terms with the sound, the effect is dramatic and you find yourself living in the middle of the movie and sweating with stress whenever the hero is stressed. Relaxing it certainly isn't, so if you like your movies to chunter away in the background whilst you catch up on the Sunday papers maybe this isn't the system for you. On the other hand if you really want to experience everything the director planned for you then this system takes you there. But there is a caveat. It's the sheer truthfulness of these loudspeakers again. There are some movies and certainly a lot of television programmes where the recorded sound quality should have got the studio engineer fired. Be warned; this system does tend to highlight such problems.

Somewhere amongst our viewing we loaded the DVD player with "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines" and experienced a frantic search for the remote control when the nuclear blast let rip straight after the opening credits. It was loud and, in retrospect, very impressive even if we risked losing some plaster from the walls. "Chicken Run" was a much safer choice but even here the good dynamic range of this system seemed to make the louder passages seem louder than expected. Certainly the build up to the blow-up of Mrs. Tweedy's pie making machine was like living inside a factory full of machinery with all the clearly defined clunks; clangs and graunches overlaying the constant subterranean rumble of boiling gravy. This was great stuff because no matter how much was going on everything stayed clear and open with excellent articulation of the voices.

We then broke into a sweat with "The Bourne Identity" vividly feeling all the stresses of being on the run with Jason Bourne then finally we took a break from the movies and relaxed with the "Led Zeppelin" DVD of their Royal Albert Hall concert from 1970. Halfway through "C'mon Everybody" I suspected that I was in danger of going deaf when the sound of Jimmy Page's guitar was delivered at seriously head-banging levels; levels that this system just took in its stride. By now the Denon receiver was feeling noticeably warm to the touch but I had a wide smile across my face. You may think that there has been little mention of the SR5 surround speakers so far. And that's simply because they did their job so well. They never drew attention to themselves; we just had a convincing spread of sound all around when needed and that is actually a good complement to their performance.

One surprise was that our sub-woofer didn't have to work very hard. Everybody likes to have plenty of the deep rumble stuff when watching movies and although the S8e speakers do go down to below 30Hz we thought they would need a little help. However make no mistake about it these loudspeakers are capable of laying down a full sledge-hammer bass to accompany Arnie whenever necessary. The REL Stampede sub-woofer did add that little bit of weight going deeper and louder but we didn't need to have its volume control set very high.



These Spendor loudspeakers make for an outstanding home cinema sound system. They are capable of producing a sound that is exceptionally clean and truthful and the delivery of dynamic sounds is enough to stop your heart beating upon occasions. And this system can play loud; very loud. Add to that their superb construction and furniture quality finish and you have to say that they are excellent value as well. Truly a case of British loudspeaker design at its very best.