

# EQUIPMENT REVIEW

## SPENDOR SP100 R2

By Paul Messenger

believe Walter Chrysler was the first who observed: "There's no substitute for cubic inches". He was talking in American and about car engines, but one could equally well substitute those lovely metric litres and apply the quote to loudspeakers.

The LS3/5a appreciation society will doubtless object to such a statement, and there's no denying that tiny speakers have several inherent advantages. I should therefore replace that quote by another that states: "A good big one will always beat a good little one", a much more defensible statement because it emphasises the word 'good'. That's partly because it's not only

much harder to build a high quality large loudspeaker than a small one, simply because it's far more difficult to control much bigger enclosures, but also because the deeper one tries to delve into the bass, the more room interaction problems raise their heads and get in the way.

But the facts remain, if you want the very best, that's bound to include loudspeakers capable of delivering genuinely deep bass alongside exceptional headroom, such as the new £6,495/pair Spendor SP100R2 reviewed here.

It's not a pretty loudspeaker, for sure – indeed some visitors described it as downright ugly. It definitely (quite deliberately I suspect) takes no account of the fashion trends that seem to drive the loudspeaker business, being a very large (37x70x43cm) stand-mount. But it does largely adhere to the dictum that form should follow function, at least within the confines of a single rectilinear enclosure, which on this occasion encompasses a considerable volume of around 90 litres.





This is the latest member of Spendor's Classics, a range that really originated way back in the early 1970s. The SP100R2's earliest traceable ancestor is arguably the 1973 Spendor BC3 (though some might point to the 1960s BBC LS5/5 monitor, built by KEF). Both these had broadly similar driver configurations to, but rather slimmer enclosures than, the S100 which replaced the BC3 in 1989. In 1994 the S100 morphed into the SP100, then the SP100R, and now becomes the SP100R2, essentially upgrading and updating the drive units and crossover network components within a similar shape and size enclosure.

All these models were or are essentially large three-way stand-mounts (albeit with an extra HF2000 supertweeter in the BC3), and all these Spondors used and use a variation on port-loading a large and very refined 12-inch bextrene-coned bass driver. Extra elastomer damping is now applied to the cone.

The SP100R2 has a new 180mm (7-inch) midrange unit with a translucent 115mm diameter cone in ep38 polymer, and a fixed central 'bullet' phase compensator. Sandwiched between the bass and midrange driver is the new, nominally 22mm, SEAS-sourced wide-surround tweeter that has been spreading through Spendor's several ranges recently. The twin ports that flank the tweeter are now injection-moulded for improved linearity.

Well- and carefully-damped thin-wall enclosures have been a key Spendor feature since its earliest days. The theory is that the relatively cabinet walls will resonate at lower frequencies than stiffer structures, so that the unavoidable cabinet colorations are



moved away from critical midrange frequencies and down towards the bass region where they cause less harm. The inset front baffle has been beefed up for the SP100R2, improving its mechanical integrity and the control of the thin-wall sides. (The rear panel is also inset.) The total weight is 34kg, which is substantial enough, but actually quite modest in view of its bulk.

Again in the Spendor tradition, all drive units and crossovers are individually calibrated and pair-matched during manufacture, and the (optional) grille is also carefully designed from an acoustic point of view. The complex, phase-aligned crossover network is well stuffed with high quality components, such as ClarityCaps, and internal wiring uses heavy silver-plated multi-strand copper conductors with superior insulation. Two pairs of multi-way socket/binder terminals are bolted directly through the rear panel, optionally linked by supplied brass strips.

Choosing the stand height caused some angst, as one tends to place a speaker so that one's seated ears are around the same height as the tweeter, or between the tweeter and the midrange unit. Because the tweeter is set below the midrange unit here, that requires 60cm stands, which is an aesthetically challenging prospect. While agreeing that tall stands should work well, Spendor suggests 35-50cm stands will be more acceptable domestically, so both were tried.

In-room frequency response measurements were taken under far-field stereo conditions, with the speakers mounted on 19 inch stands and sited well clear of walls. This 'power response' showed a pretty good bass alignment, very well maintained down to -2dB at 20Hz, while the room-mode-related boost at 50Hz stayed under reasonable control.

Output is just a little strong across the whole bass region, and very smooth and well balanced through much of the midband. However, there's also a rather obvious peak across the 1kHz and 2kHz octave, and some unevenness 2-5kHz. Raising the speakers up onto higher 24 inch stands (admittedly not a particularly pretty sight) did improve the overall balance a little, by rendering that 1-2kHz peak a little less obtrusive. ▶

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▶ Spendor's sensitivity claim is a quite conservative 89dB/W – I'd have given the speaker 90dB. Furthermore, although the impedance trace is quite complex, it never falls below an easy-to-drive 7 ohms. The ports are tuned to a very low 23Hz.

Sonically the SP100R2 has plenty going for it, but there are some grounds for criticism nevertheless. The speakers were positioned well clear of walls and placed first on 19 inch and subsequently on 25 inch Kudos S100 stands. The driving system primarily consisted of Naim NAC552/NAP500 amplification, Naim CDS3/555PS and Rega Valve Isis CD players, Magnum Dynalab MD106T FM tuner and a Linn/Rega hybrid vinyl player with SoundSmith Strain Gauge cartridge. Interconnect and mains cables were from Naim, Phonosophie, Vertex AQ, the Chord Company and TM Systems. Speaker cables were VertexAQ HiRez Moncayo.

Besides listening to the SP100R2s at length in isolation, it was also possible to compare them directly to several relevant references. These included historic Spendor BC1s, plus the PMC IB2i and B&W 800 Diamond current models.

The SP100R2's most obvious strength lies in its impressive overall homogeneity and coherence. Cabinet coloration is clearly very well controlled indeed here, which is really quite surprising for such a large enclosure, and a testament to the efficacy of Spendor's unique 'thin wall' cabinet approach. And because it largely avoids generating listening fatigue, that in turn makes this speaker very easy to listen to over the long haul.

It was certainly significantly preferred on the higher 25 inch stands, whereupon the speaker were remarkably adept at 'disappearing' sonically, leaving just the music properly laid out across the soundstage, with full bandwidth and wide dynamic range. That said, image depth did seem a trifle constrained.

It's not entirely without coloration: comparisons with the BC1 showed that the SP100R2's measured upper-mid peak was audible enough as a slight 'cupped hands' exaggeration. While voices are a tad over-projected and the top end is a shade restrained, neither of these factors are particularly intrusive, nor do they significantly detract from the impressive overall character.

The bass end of things adds plenty of weight and scale, but its grip and tension are a little less than the best, and these showed their limitations when confronted with heavy rock and dance material. In truth, this speaker just seems a little more comfortable with Mozart than with Massive Attack

One major advantage that a big 3-way has over more conventional 2-way designs is of course greatly increased power handling and loudness capability. That certainly applies to this speaker, but perhaps rather more important is the very sweet, natural and delicate sound it delivers when operating at very low levels.

It's difficult to evaluate the value for money of a very costly loudspeaker like this, but the SP100R2's £6,495 per pair seems to fit in with its rivals pretty well. It's not as good as the big B&W 800 Diamond, but it's only a third of the price, while it seems like pretty good competition for the slightly more costly PMC IB2i. Each of these speakers has its own quite distinct physical and sonic characters, both of which will influence any purchase decision. One might be unlikely to pick the SP100R2 on aesthetic grounds, but it does supply a wonderfully homogenous, full bandwidth sound that will particularly suit those that favour classical material. +



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 3-way stand-mount

**Drive units:** HF 22mm wide-surround

Midrange 18cm, ep38 cone

LF 30cm, damped bextrene cone

**Sensitivity:** 89dB/W (90dB/W measured)

**Crossover points:** 550Hz, 3.8kHz

**Frequency response:** 45Hz - 20kHz ± 3dB anechoic

**Bass extension:** -6dB @ 35Hz anechoic

**Impedance:** 8 ohms nom, 6 ohms min

**Pair matched:** within 1dB

**Power handling:** 200W unclipped program

**Finish:** cherry or black ash veneer

**Size (wxhxd, cm):** 37x70x430

**Weight:** 36kg

**Price:** £6495 per pair

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