

## Bookshelf Loudspeakers: Aerial 5 and Spondor SP3/1P

What is one to do when music is more important than sound? When my wife and I bought a new house, we began to note the inevitable necessity of music in the living room, though neither of us wants a ten-component system dominating conversation. This journal has occasionally run pieces on compiling audiophile-grade systems for those whose musical sensibilities outstrip their patience for audiophilia, but what is an audiophile to do when he wants a downstairs system downstairs?

Like many of you, I have an actual listening space (which I share with my home office), but I do not have time to luxuriate there all day. Alas, much of my listening occurs in my car, in which resides a nice little system – excellent bass, tolerable imaging, unsafe maximum volume – for which I make no apologies. And much of the rest of my listening occurs in my living room, reading the paper, chatting with my wife, entertaining friends. Decorum alone would prohibit the display of expensive electronic equipment in here.

Nonetheless, music being an enduring element of my life, doing without seems impossible, and here our quest begins. Assembling a small system (CD, integrated, speakers) for the living room presents expediences for the seizing. Armed with a modest CD player and amplifier, I undertook the survey of a small number of petite speakers. The idea was simple: a respectable and musical pair of boxes that could be placed on inconspicuous stands (or, hush, actually pressed into service apposite their nomenclature: *on a bookshelf*).

It should not have surprised me that nearly every available shoebox-sized woofer and tweeter would begin rolling in. Manufacturers are more willing to part with \$1,500 loudspeakers than with \$10,000 tube amplifiers. I resolved to give each a fair hearing, beginning with time on a more sophisticated “reference” system in my main listening room, and then moving the operations to the living room. Herewith the beginning of a series of speaker reviews, apropos of a literal “downstairs” system.

Damn, these little things are heavy.

Aerial Acoustics’ Model 5 defies expectations. Diminutive, undeniably, but its heft, its finish, and its presentation all betray a much larger heart. Perhaps Aerial’s Michael Kelly fills it with leftover VPI bricks (remember those?), but whatever the cause, it leaves no doubt that its auditioner will fare well in the mini-monitor pound-per-dollar sweeps.

The Aerial 5 is small but not tiny. It is available in five finishes; the light maple, which you’ve seen in the ads, is the way to go. That will set you back \$2,300, and Aerial’s way rigid stands are worth the extra \$500. Don’t skimp. Unless you really are going to use these on a bookshelf. (I have found consistently that the stands are not a good value unless you also buy the speakers to put on them.)

Those with experiences among the breed will

not be startled to learn that foremost among the strengths of the 5 is a wall-defying sense of space and a disappearing act worthy of my younger brother when it was his turn to do the dishes. Blue Rodeo’s *Diamond Mine* [Risqué Disque/WEA Canada 25 62681-1], perhaps their most ambitious album, concludes with “The Ballad of the Dime Store Greaser and the Blonde Mona Lisa,” a twisted lullaby redolent of nothing so much as Tom Waits’ characters. The first illusion achieved is that of a vast, tavern-like space, the more so for the spooky realism in placing the piano and vocals plausibly within the wood-and-brick construct. Another soulful ballad, “House of Dreams,” evokes Raymond Chandler’s suavity as much as Percy Sledge’s yearning; listening with eyes closed, one forgets quickly that there are merely two little boxes staring straight ahead, seemingly inert and unrelated to the canvas of sound emerging between them.

Richard Buckner’s whiskey-soaked wowl on his second album, *Devotion + Doubt* [MCA 11564], also finds its space on “Song of 27,” a spare reminder of love’s power to overcome distance. The Aerials convey a sense of intimacy in the small space they effect on this small but poignant elegy. Here, too, there is a decent illusion of height, even on normal stands, with the six-foot Buckner appearing maybe five feet tall – two feet higher than the speakers. Similar effect was achieved on *Mermaid Avenue* [Elektra 62204-1], the collaboration among Billy Bragg, Wilco, and (posthumously, of course) Woody Guthrie. “Another Man’s Done Gone” put vocals spot-on in the middle ring of the circus; the drums propelling “The Unwelcome Guest” seemingly many feet behind singers.

Lest all this sensitivity makes it sound like the Aerials are prissy, guess again, sailor. At \$1,800 to \$2,500 a pair, these contend in the real world, and that means muscular amps are encouraged. At any listening levels that could be termed reasonable, the Aerials do not flinch. I drove them with tubes rigged to deliver about 110 watts, and one knows in his gut that the medium-sized Classés and Conrad-Johnsons – 150 watts or more – would do just fine. (The Aerials are not ported, so while their sensitivity is relatively low, they can be driven like a bad mule.) Son Volt’s recent *Wide Swing Tremolo* [Warner Bros. 47059-1] reads like a wall of sound, with guitars wailing over, under, around Jay Farrar’s languid



vocals. The urgent “Strands” rings with an inexorable insistence and tracks well on the small Aerials, proving that all is not equal in the land of woofs and tweets. These speakers can be driven much harder than most other small monitors, which run out of propulsive energy just when they need it worst.

Nobody but a fool would expect concussive bass from a small box, and the Aerials do not startle here. The apocalyptic “Medicine Hat,” the best tune from *Wide Swing Tremolo*, contains two roistering bass drum thwacks between verse and chorus, and even several feet from the rear wall, the Aerials’ mid-bass is startling. But alas, the effect is more intellectual than visceral. Those who can stand unnaturally emphasized mid-bass might prefer to experiment with placement further, as the wrong position can lend augmentation in that range. But this is for masochists only, as a box this size will not be a duodenum-mover at anything approaching realistic tonal balance.

Confident in their panache and certain that the Aerials would outclass the modest gear in the living room, I hauled them down, nearly dropping them more than once, and popped them on stands flanking the fireplace.

Another object lesson in the relative power of 25 watts. The Aerials commanded a huge sense of space on Ry Cooder and V. M. Bhatt’s *A Meeting by the River* [Water Lily CS-29], placing both the dumbek and tabla precisely in my living room. The impression of bass was surprisingly good, but not as good as with an amplifier more buff (a “buffer” amplifier?).

On Buckner’s “Song of 27,” the vocals were again precise, but not holographic. Though downstairs actually permits wider spacing between speakers, through the smaller amplifier the music sounded smaller than life, a nylon-string guitar portrayed as a tad papery. On the same album’s “Lil Wallet Picture,” there is a noticeably grainy scrim over the vocals, a product, of course, of the amplifier, not the speakers, but the point regarding the synergy is made. The same scrim appears over the statement at the beginning of Oliver Nelson’s “Cascades” from his classic *The Blues and the Abstract Truth* [Impulse IMPD-154].

Even with 25 watts, the speakers can be driven to surprising volume with no compromise of tonal balance. In Ansermet’s rendering of Borodin’s *Symphony No. 2* [London/Classic CSCD 6126], the Aerials do not attempt to compensate for lack of deep bass with an ersatz lower midrange. Even when music swells, the Aerials maintain their composure. The brass in the first movement is positioned precisely, but not artificially – these speakers know their strengths, and play to them. They are not over-achievers in the lower bass, and thus their macrodynamic sense is not, relative to live music, more constricted than it need be.

Still, there is the matter of image height, amply portrayed on Dusty Springfield’s *Dusty in Memphis* [Atlantic/Rhino R2 71035]. The disc is miked as if from a “wide-angle” microphone at Dusty’s feet: backing vocals and instruments are both shorter and

artificially distant, a photograph foreshortened. But the soundstage extends well outside the speakers, as it does in JVC’s thoughtful treatment of Sarah Vaughan’s *Crazy and Mixed Up* [JVCXR-0204-2]. Tonally, the electric guitar exemplifies the match between amp and speaker: delectably Reubenesque in the middle, truncated at the frequency extremes. But the soul of the music plays well in Peoria: the speakers’ ability to portray the glorious rhythmic drive of Vaughan’s “That’s All” at rather surprising volume manifests no strain at all. On “In Love in Vain,” the introduction reminds us that a piano struck aggressively produces a “click” as the note’s leading edge. Andy Simpkins’ bass solo also swings with microdynamic verisimilitude: Even if the whump goes missing, the soul does not. Even with the distance between speakers wider than their distance to the listener, the coherent presentation of the bass is, candidly, quite amazing.

In many ways, “amazing” does it here. These unassuming but attractive little boxes are within their range tonally honest, create an uncanny sense of space, image with the best, and can be driven almost assaultively without crying uncle. On the other hand, they do not suffer inferior equipment gladly, and unless your electronics are up to the task, you would likely be happier with a better amp and less speaker. (Remember the old dictum that you should spend most of your money on the speakers? Cretins.) In the right system, these are capable of quite good sound.

At what is long green for some people, there is the little matter of competition here, and for this kind of dough, speakers with another octave must be considered seriously. The Martin-Logan Aeries i, Magnepan 1.6, and Thiel 1.5, to name just a few, are *cheaper* than the Aerials (with stands) and provide more extended bass. (Even a little more extension at this level is likely to be a good investment, relative to the other tradeoffs, of course.) If properly set up, any of the above – especially the Magnepan – is capable of reproducing image and soundstage as adeptly as the Aerials.

However, none (except perhaps the Thiels) is as forgiving of placement, and Lord knows none will fit on a bookshelf, or in any kind of room without dominating it visually. And that’s why there will always be a market for a capable, well-engineered, and attractive mini-monitor. If your space is limited, and you find yourself drawn to the advantages offered by their ilk, the Aerial 5 is confidently recommended.

### Downstairs, Downscale

The Spondor SP3/1P is the latest incarnation from the dependable British manufacturer whose single greatest liability seems to be an omerta involving the naming of their speakers. Let me attempt to translate: the Spondor Model Three (the “3”), the smallest among the single-digit speakers, in its first iteration (the “1”), which is actually its second iteration, the first having no port and the one in question adding a rear-firing port (the “P”). Why it is not the 3/2 is anyone’s guess, this kind of arcane obfuscation a seeming guilty pleasure to those pesky Brits.

For some reason, the Spondors initially impressed

me as more workmanlike than the effete-looking Aerial 5. At \$1,495 (plus stands), there is the \$500 difference (which buys a lot of veneer), but that can't be it. Perhaps it is that Spondors have always been unremarkable in the best sense, or that my sample pair was finished in the dreaded "black ash." (One imagines an endangered forest of black ash trees, clearcut by callous logging concerns. Does Spondor plant black ash trees in a show of enlightened environmentalism?) In any event, a rather attractive cherry finish is also available.

This is a frustrating speaker, not because it is not good – it is. Rather, I struggle to describe in writing what I have heard, for its sum is not always represented by its parts. What the Spondors do wrong is easy to catalog: its faults are endemic to small speakers, and it is not uncolored. But somehow the Spondor manages to communicate music in spite of its faults, and for this deserves serious consideration in a modest system.

To begin, the Spondors' port, while boosting the speakers' efficiency, complicates placement somewhat. Doug MacLeod's *You Can't Take My Blues* [JVCXR-0027] boasts superb, coherent electric bass, but it plunges deep and quickly, and can excite the Spondors' ports something wicked – everything below the upper bass sounds like the same note. You can ameliorate this problem, of course, by moving the speakers closer to the front wall, but at the expense of some spaciousness of the soundstage.

In other parts of the spectrum, the Spondors excel at emphasizing the yin in music. Richard Buckner's "Song of 27" sounds supremely calm, perhaps at the expense of some of its edginess. In "Lil' Walleet Picture," the Spondors offer excellent spatial delineation between the steel, the guitar, and the mandolin, even lending an air of the pacific to another of Buckner's anxiously obsessive tales.

Throughout my listening, the Spondors' tone proved elusive and highly dependent on particular recordings. On Van Morrison's *Moondance* [Direct Disk Labs SD16604], there is exceptional tonal accuracy in the steel-string guitar on "Caravan," and, with the speakers judiciously positioned, very fine, if not visceral, bass definition. On the 1962 Jack Marshall and Shelly Manne funfest, *Sounds Unheard Of!* [Contemporary S9006], the first salient trait was a superb sense of image and depth, as Manne's percussion chases itself around the speakers. Still, despite superior tonal definition of nylon-string guitar, quite good midrange transients, and accurate portrayal of the cymbals' reverberation, I could not help but think the bass was overstuffed at times.

The drums that introduce "The Continental" exhibit space and midrange transients capably, but their weight is compromised and there is a thickness in the lowest guitar notes. Manne and Marshall's 1966 follow-up, *Sounds* [Capitol ST2610], is also an audiophile spectacular, more convincingly reproduced on the Spondors than its predecessor. Not surprisingly, recordings with bass slightly to somewhat reserved (which is to say, most non-audiophile spec-taculars) fare quite well. The eponymous debut of the



bluegrass Old & In The Way quintet [Round Records RX 103] offers excellent delineation of vocals in its folksy cover of "Wild Horses."

Up-tilted recordings like Paul Desmond's *Pure Desmond* [CTI 6059 S1] create a synergy with the Spondors, allowing their greatest strength, an incredibly precise sense of image, to emerge. On the Cowboy Junkies' debut, *The Trinity Session* [RCA 8568-2], the first track's flapping air vent is obvious behind and to Margo Timmins' right, her voice planted precisely at center. The Spondors can be pushed a little, but an unflinching 100 watts may be a little much. On the Cowboy Junkies' "Dreaming my Dreams with You," a familiar theme sounds: The bass is loose, the image otherwise precise.

To this point, however, methinks the protest too loud. The last example suffices: the Spondors, despite their faults, are intoxicating. As soon as Margo Timmins begins to sing, and this Gemini stops listening with his anal-retentive side, he finds the Spondors rather more than capable in portraying the emotion of music. One is reminded of Horowitz or perhaps Garcia: While the technical aspects were at times unfathomable, they seldom failed to convey the

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#### MANUFACTURER/DISTRIBUTOR INFORMATION

##### Spondor SP3/1P

Q, S, & D  
 33 McWhirt Loop, #108  
 Fredricksburg, Virginia 22406  
 Tel: 800-659-3711  
 Email: qsandd@aol.com  
 Source: Distributor loan  
 Price: \$1,400 per pair

##### Aerial 5

Aerial Acoustics  
 P.O. Box 81248  
 Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts 02481  
 Tel: 781-235-7715  
 www.aerialacoustics.com  
 Source: Manufacturer loan  
 Price: \$1,800 - \$2,500/pair, depending on finish


emotion and soul of music. Is this a component's job in the way that it is a musician's? I don't know, but I know that music is rather seductive through the Spondors, whatever their faults.

The seduction continued downstairs. A visitor stared in disbelief at speakers ten feet apart, while Sarah Vaughan appeared between them, precisely. There was no apologizing, though, for Vaughan's unexpected testosterone rush, another manifestation of the Spondors' mellow balance. Margo Timmins' voice was also creamy, as was the lush guitar on "Blue Moon" (not on the original RCA album but on the CD and thankfully restored on the Classic reissue). Dusty Springfield's opening "Just a Little Lovin'" was simply dreamy, with the Spondors mitigating some of the top-end harshness on this white soul gem.

In spite of their suavity, the Spondors did not soften the midrange. In "Stolen Moments," from *Blues and the Abstract Truth*, Nelson's tenor solo has the sting of the saxophone, and Freddie Hubbard's trumpet conveys the proper tone in "Yearnin'." On Ansermet's Borodin, the Spondors' portrayal of image triumphed yet again, and here it was instructive: not the over-focus of hi-fi, but the more amorphous precision of the real thing.

With the low-powered Anthem on the Borodin, the Spondors compressed macrodynamics

noticeably; with the Quicksilvers, they were over-taxed. But again, I am struggling to describe the utterly generous emotion conveyed by music through the Spondors. While this is not a product in the same league as, say, the Joule Electra OPS-2 phono stage (in either price or fidelity), there is some of the latter's magic in the former: Despite all the faults, what they both communicate is music, and they remind us just how didactic criticism can become. The Spondors have substantial flaws, as do any audio products and especially those suitable to "downstairs" systems. But they are also, in their odd little British way, faithful to the soul of music; and while I can find many faults in my head, my heart hears nary a peep that is not sweet music.

At this point on the price ladder, there are many good speakers, but no great ones that I'm aware of. Compromises are fairly substantial – in this light, is it acceptable to choose a piece of equipment that is pleasing even if not musically accurate? I think so: Who is to say that extended highs are more important than extended bass, or that a sin of commission, like a muddy midbass, is worse than a missing top end? Who, further, can say that the head counts more than the heart? The Spondor 3/1 is a music lover's speaker. And so it deserves consideration, most especially by those who were, and are, music lovers long before they are audiophiles. 

PETER BRAVERMAN