

The Spendor D1 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory

Too often, changes seem to be made for change's sake. So excuse me if I feel a little cynical when one of my favourite loudspeakers is unceremoniously replaced with a new, 'improved' model, especially when the affection for that speaker is invested in both its historical antecedents and a current version that I consider a small-box reference. The model in question is Spendor's SA1: I loved the original and always preferred it to the LS3/5A. I loved the recent version and have come to rely on it for both reviewing and listening pleasure. This goes way beyond a reviewer's fling or even a steady relationship. This is a marriage that's fast approaching Ruby Wedding status. How dare that man Swift (that being Philip, *eminence gris* at Spendor) simply dump the SA1?

In fact, it's not just the speaker that's gone. Just to add insult to injury the model designation has been changed, too. Things were definitely not looking good, but just when my seething outrage was threatening to bubble over, I received a cardboard carton of familiar size and minimal weight – at least by audio standards. Inside was a pair of the brand spanking new D1s, sporting exactly the same attractive proportions as my much-loved SA1s. Okay, so they didn't have the glossy Zebrano finish, but their darker, satin-coated veneers were certainly classy. I could feel myself starting to waver... Still, the proof of the pudding would be in the eating – or, in this case, the listening – so plenty of scope for disappointment yet.

Which is when a strange and wholly unexpected thing happened. Even from cold, the new D1s were clearly impressive, but more than that, it was just as clear that they were musically superior to the SA1 in every single respect. There was nothing subtle about this: there were no swings or roundabouts involved: the D1 was just plain better than the SA1 – and by a considerable margin. Now, this is not supposed to happen. I love(d) the SA1, finding it preferable to any of the equivalent sub-miniatures out there. It was a genuinely great little speaker. So how come the D1 comes along and all of sudden it makes the SA1 sound broken? Because that's exactly what happened: all of a sudden my concerns over the new model were transferred to its predecessor as I started wondering how I could have tolerated its now obvious flaws?

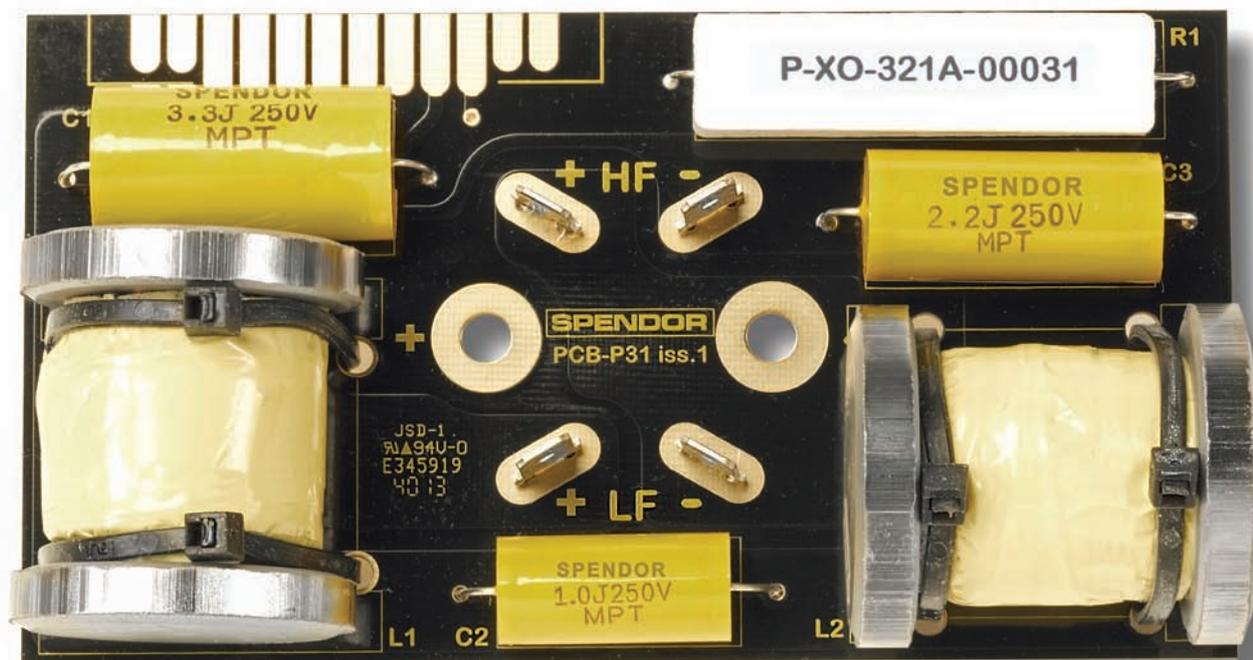
The answer of course lies in expectation. We judge by what we think is possible and what is possible is defined by what is. It's not that the SA1 is a bad speaker. It really is a genuinely excellent performer, especially compared to its peers. But the D1 is a class apart and it shows. So I guess the question becomes, why the great leap forward?

If you want to nail the difference between the SA1 and D1, just listen to them side by side, preferably with a familiar voice. Playing tracks by Eliza Gilkyson and Don Henley from the Jackson Browne tribute album, *Looking Into You* (Music Road Records MRR CD018) it's difficult to believe that the two speakers share common DNA. The increase in presence, body and immediacy with the D1 is remarkable, as is the added range of texture, tonal colour, and harmonic complexity. It all adds up to making the voices more natural, more familiar, and much more believable. But that believability also depends on something less obvious but actually, musically much more significant: There is an easy sense of rhythmic flow and articulation, continuity, and dynamic expression with the D1 that underpins the attack, emphasis, and phrasing in the performance, revealing a positive, definite quality to the placement and shaping of notes, adding drama, and expressive range to the songs. Play them on the D1 and the singers sound far more accomplished, their performances more serious and heartfelt.

In truth, the clue to the new model's superiority lies in plain sight, with the change to the D1 designation marking the miniature speaker's elevation to Spendor's flagship D line, along with the adoption of the driver and cabinet technology that goes with it. The most obvious example of that is the flat, perforated front-plate of the novel LPZ tweeter. A Spendor in-house development, it looks different and it works very differently to traditional soft dome units. The micro-foil 'grille' in front of the polyamide dome creates a pressure zone that equalizes loading on either side of the diaphragm. Effectively acting as a coupled cavity (an approach more often used at the opposite end of the frequency response) it works to control the tweeter's mechanical behaviour and dispersion, producing a smooth, phase coherent, linear output across the driver's range.

Those familiar with the SA1 might also note the black-coned bass unit, in place of the original's translucent driver. It ►





► signals the adoption of Spendor's EP77 diaphragm material, offering superior stiffness and self-damping. Built onto a cast, magnesium chassis, and using the same central phase plug as its predecessor, the new driver offers quicker, more dynamic response, and better mechanical characteristics. It's lightweight yet stiff chassis is adept at transferring spurious energy away from the driver and into the cabinet. Of course, that could be a case of out of the musical frying pan and into the sonic fire, if the cabinet isn't up to dealing with that energy, but it's here that in many ways we find the basis of the D1's remarkable breakthrough. I'm certainly not dismissing the contribution of the drivers, the tweeter being especially impressive, but it's changes to the cabinet that let you really hear those benefits.

The SA1's cabinet was no slouch, constructed from three different thicknesses of MDF to help spread resonance and critically positioned bituminous damping pads to help absorb it. But the D1 takes things to a new level with a thin wall construction employing constrained layer bracing. As well as the use of asymmetrical cut-outs in the multiple braces, small but extremely efficient elastomer pads are clamped at critical points between those braces and the cabinet walls, effectively dissipating spikes of mechanical energy in the structure by converting them to heat. Combined with the stiffness inherent in such small panels, the result is one clean, audibly unintrusive mechanical foundation for the drivers bolted to its

front face, with little or no stored energy filtering back through the structure to blur or shift the pattern of musical energy they produce. Take these changes into account and suddenly the remarkably natural, lucid presentation of the little Spendors starts to make perfect sense. Despite retaining the same high 4.8kHz crossover point, those new drivers mandate a revised crossover, while other detail changes all help lift performance. For those using banana plugs, removing the heavy collars from Spendor's own binding posts will add a little further clarity, removing a subtle but pervasive layer of grain.

Just as the D1 adds a chest to back up Gilkyson's characteristically nasal voice, it adds body to guitars and drums too – and not just snares; toms get a sense of body and pitch as well, adding power and pattern to drum figures and impulse to the tracks they drive. The Cure might not seem like natural material to demonstrate the abilities of a refined sub-miniature like this, but playing 'Seventeen Seconds' brings home just how readily the D1 can separate bass guitar and the left-hand of piano, just how quick and taut its bottom end is (a characteristic that allows its use closer to walls than you might imagine). Yes, it lacks weight when compared to larger speakers, but it avoids the cardinal sin of padding its bottom end for effect. Instead the transparency, precision, and clarity of the D1's bass matches and integrates perfectly with the rest of the speaker. I don't know what the numbers say, but it seems to go deeper than the SA1 and it is certainly ►

“It could become part of a genuinely full-range, high-end loudspeaker solution on an installment plan.”

► much more effective. No speaker this small can do real bass, but the D1 does the next best thing, giving you pitch and pace so that you can hear exactly what’s going on beneath that gloriously open, natural and expressive midrange. Just listen to the deeply fingered walking bass on the track ‘In Your House’ to really appreciate just how articulate and effective the D1’s bottom end can be.

Having made the little speaker do tricks with inappropriate partners, it’s time to play to its strengths. It’s neutrality, seamless integration and rich tonal palette make the D1 a natural for all forms of acoustic music. Even so, large scale orchestral works wouldn’t seem to be the natural choice, yet play Barbirolli’s EMI recording of the Sibelius 2nd Symphony (with the Hallé) and the D1’s will surprise you. Their musical integrity, sure-footed temporal grasp, and enthusiastic response to dynamic demands create a compelling musical picture, revealing the way Barbirolli’s mastery of tempo and structure brings order and purpose to this most fractured of compositions. Okay, so the presentation lacks the sense of an overarching acoustic space, but the extended pizzicato bass passage at the beginning of the second movement highlights just how agile these speakers are. The urgency and sense of purpose in the playing seem to naturally attract the attentions of the rest of the orchestra as the piece slowly builds, the brass tutti explode convincingly and each restatement or development of a major theme is clearly stated. Few speakers that I’ve heard can unravel this complex orchestration and lay bare the musical structure (as well as the character of the performance) with such ease. Play the Berglund/BSO performance and you’ll see what I mean: where Barbirolli is all restraint and slowly building tension, poise, and balance, Berglund’s reading is sweeping, full-blooded, and lyrical, all about broad brush strokes where Sir John is all about textural intimacy. Rarely have the differences seemed so obvious, a clear indication of this little speaker’s remarkable musical coherence and insight. More than any other quality this is a carry over (and extension) from the SA1, a speaker that had the uncanny knack of allowing each recording to sound individual and distinctive. The D1 takes that so much further, its ability to respond to sudden dynamic shifts and its added range of colour, the body it brings to voices and instruments, and the remarkable rhythmic coherence it displays across its entire

range revealing not just the character of each performance but the nature of the recording itself. If ever there was a little speaker that could, then this is it...

Which brings me to what is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the D1’s musical offering. Most people using a speaker this size will do so because they can’t afford, accommodate, or don’t feel they need, something bigger. The natural musical advantages of a small box with only two drivers are well recognised. After all, the fewer the ingredients the less damage they can do. But so too are the disadvantages, when it comes to scale, bandwidth, and power. Yet such is the sheer musical coherence and expressive range available from the D1 that, as astonishingly satisfying as it is playing solo, it is simply crying out to be used with a good subwoofer (or even two). Suddenly, rather than a stop-gap solution or compromise, it could become part of a genuinely full-range, high-end loudspeaker solution on an instalment plan. The Wilson Benesch Torus is an obvious candidate, while models from Eclipse TD offer a more affordable alternative. But standalone or as part of a longer-term growth strategy, this is one remarkable little speaker. So, Philip Swift, all is more than forgiven. The SA1 impressed a lot of people, myself included. Just wait until they get a load of this! +

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Two-way sealed box loudspeaker

Driver Complement: 1× Spendor LPZ soft dome tweeter,
1× 150mm EP77 mid/bass driver

Sensitivity: 85dB

Nominal Impedance: 8 Ohms

Crossover Frequency: 4.8kHz

Dimensions (W×H×D): 165 × 305 × 190mm

Weight: 5.7kg ea.

Finishes: Black or white lacquer, satin Ebony

Price: € 2,450 pr. € 700 pr. matching stands

Manufacturer: Spendor Audio Systems Ltd, Hailsham, UK

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