

Substantial Spendor

MARTIN COLLOMS PUTS SPENDOR'S LATEST A9 HEAVYWEIGHT UNDER THE HIFICRITIC MICROSCOPE



A recent meeting made it clear that Philip Swift, Spendor's current owner-director, is now firmly imbued with the company's near legendary, BBC-based ethos. Co-founder of Audiolab, with many years of production and corporate management experience behind him, Swift has long admired Spendor. Indeed he was active in hi-fi retail from 1969 at the original Audio T in Oxford Street's Dryden Chambers, forming a tech support team that included myself and Derek Scotland, when Spendor first burst on the audio scene, setting remarkable standards for clarity and low coloration from box loudspeakers – standards which in part have yet to be equalled. We marvelled at the intricate layered sounds created by the *BC1*, which made so many instruments and voices sound substantially more natural than we had previously heard from anything save the more quietly voiced original Quad *Electrostatic*.

Swift has had to reconcile the disparity between the earlier and recognisably BBC derived Spendors, now called *Classics* (several still in production and deservedly popular), and the more recent modern designs where style, slim form and a more 'up to date' sound (if there is such a thing). It's something of a juggling act to hold the two lines together and make the best of both.

The *Classics* have lightweight thin wall low coloration enclosures with bitumen panel damping and more traditional rectangular stand-mount enclosures – even for the largest three-way *S100* with its 12inch bass driver. The more recent designs tend to be slimmer, usually floorstanding, with more rigid braced enclosures and innovative drive units.

A key factor is Spendor's commitment to making its own bass and mid drivers, a tradition begun by founder Spencer Hughes, derived from his painstaking labours spent building and voicing polymer cone drivers for BBC prototypes in the 1960s. The resources of the BBC, with its reference recordings and comparisons to live sound, vitalised the creation of finely tuned, highly developed, repeatable, consistent speaker systems which are essential characteristics for a studio monitor. Making its own drivers allows Spendor to maintain these standards of consistency, and develop the drivers to a high standard.

Talking design with Swift revealed his grip on the more subtle aspects of speaker technology, design and voicing, and understanding of how Spendor's long researched technology could be applied to advantage in the new designs. As he explained, while everyone favours a smooth, flat frequency response, it's how you

get there that matters. "Do you employ more complex crossover fixes to correct minor dips and peaks in the response, or do you fix the drivers at source using engineering fundamentals?"

All this has led to the new £4,000/pair *A9*, first seen at the recent Bristol Show and the largest of the more value oriented *A* series. While Swift was undoubtedly a guiding hand, Spendor's recently appointed chief designer is Terry Miles, who has been production engineering Spendors for decades, including under Spencer Hughes.

In line with my own views (and indeed those of Keith Howard who writes in *Hi-Fi News* and *Stereophile*), the *A9* is designed from the start as a good amplifier load with a usefully high sensitivity. Both these factors make amplifiers and speaker cables sound better, period. (This bonus is regularly ignored – indeed contradicted – by many brands, which pursue a senseless scramble for the 'loudest speaker in the showroom', no matter what the cost in overall system sound quality.)

A true three-way system, the *A9* has a pair of custom built bass drivers with 180mm cast alloy chassis' and Kevlar reinforced diaphragms, designed for optimal tuning in this fourth generation linear flow, low air velocity and hence low 'wind' noise bass reflex, vented near the floor boundary for more consistently controlled room coupling. No enclosure volume damping is used, in order to deliver unrestricted, fast and well timed bass.

The midrange driver has a 150mm cast frame with an open voice-coil and phase correcting pole. Its cone material, codenamed ep38, resulted from an in-depth trawl of a number of recent engineering co-polymers. While one may begin by assessing mechanical parameters like stiffness and loss or damping with raw sheet stock, nothing compares with making up a number of cone samples and listening to them, the method used to select this promising newcomer.

Since it has an inherent output beyond 10kHz, Miles was able to choose a higher than usual crossover frequency of 5kHz, above the most critical aural band and allowing greater tweeter dynamic expression. The crossovers also avoid most attenuating resistors by using Spendor's own high tolerance auto-transformer inductors, and exploit the degrees of freedom these provide to blend the system phase and amplitude response. The nominally 25mm doped fabric dome tweeter has a wide surround and moulded elliptical waveguide.

A new approach to enclosure damping applies low