



Classic Power

Spendor has a new flagship loudspeaker in its Classic range – the SP200 floorstander. Yes, those are 12in bass units! Jon Myles gets blown away.

Hi-fi heritage is a precious thing – and not many UK brands can boast an unbroken manufacturing tradition stretching back almost half a century. Fortunately, Spendor is one of them. And while the company may have undergone a few transitions since it was founded by Spencer and Dorothy Hughes in the late 1960s, its current head Philip Swift has a firm grasp of the company's traditions.

Which is why the Classic range of loudspeakers stands as one of its flagship products. They are truly retro in looks but use the latest developments in drive units and cabinet construction to produce their sound.

I first encountered the series when I reviewed the range-topping SPI00 R2 some three years ago (Hi-Fi World May 2013). They measured 70cm x 37cm x 43cm (H/W/D) and weighed 36kg per cabinet. Two healthy people (or a hoist) were needed to get them onto suitably sturdy and low-profile stands. But once done they sounded sublime. Tonally accurate? Not really. Thoroughly enjoyable? Definitely.

So, considering the SPI00 R2's profile and size, it was not surprising that customers repeatedly asked if they could come up with a floorstanding version. Which sounds easy in theory – but is rather more difficult in practice. Simply increasing the cabinet size can work but adds the danger of throwing the whole balance of the design out of kilter. And what would be the point if it didn't improve on the original design?

Which is why it's taken some years to develop the SP200 – that is, in essence, an entirely new addition to the Classic line-up. It sits above the SPI00 R2 and adds something different to the range without altering the overall look of the series.

So this loudspeaker still has that retro look with the cloth grille slotting into the recessed fascia of

the wooden cabinet for a flush fit. Behind the grille lies an interesting driver line-up. This is a true three-way loudspeaker, with two 12-inch bass units below a 22mm tweeter, the 7-inch mid-range unit sitting at top.

The important mid-range unit uses Spendor's EP77 polymer cone material which is claimed to be rigid but non-resonant, whilst providing a smooth frequency response. The bass units are made from Bextrene, fitted with Kevlar composite dustcaps.

This line-up requires a large cabinet and the SP200 measures 110cm x 37cm x 43cm (H/W/D) weighing in at 52kg per unit. Spendor say they use a thin wall construction, allied to a rigid baffle with carefully positioned visco-elastic damping material inside to absorb the energy from standing waves and prevent them from transferring reverberations to the cabinet.

Positioning is not that difficult – the SP200s are a sealed-box design so they can be placed close to a back wall without unduly affecting their sound. They also have three pairs of sturdy 'speaker connections on the rear to enable tri-amping if that suits.

SOUND QUALITY

Big loudspeakers have many benefits. Most are easy to drive, so from the start I partnered the big Spendors

with our trusty Quad II-eighty valve monoblocks. Their cabinets were aligned to fire straight down the room.

Call it luck or mere happenstance, but this was a match made in heaven. The SP200s were smooth but able to dig out detail few other loudspeakers can manage.

Playing Mahler's 'No 2' by the San Francisco Symphony, their deep low frequency clarity was impossible to fault. Bass drums didn't just rumble, they started and stopped with precision, punching me in the chest – but then receding without overhang.

Such a solid foundation allowed



Spendor's midrange unit employs the company's EP77 polymer in a cone that, they claim, is rigid but non-resonant, providing a smooth frequency response. It gives an easy sounding midband.

pianos, violins, cellos and vocalists to have strong presence. There was a little warmth on display but it wasn't overly rich or cloying – I heard a natural, enveloping sound where crescendoes appeared from seemingly nowhere, while quieter passages retained their natural space.

The SP200s were also pacy and rhythmic for their size. Those two big



Three sets of 'speaker binding posts allow for tri-wiring.

12-inch bass units came in just when needed and did not dominate. Playing James Blake's 'Limit To Your Love' their sub-sonics were not just heard but also felt.

With the subtle interplay between piano and saxophone on Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane's 'Live At Carnegie Hall' the SP200s were remarkably fleet of foot.

Monk's piano is resonant but also propulsive, while Coltrane's phrasing weaves a magical spell around his partner's keyboard. I've heard other loudspeakers bring out more detail on this performance – but none sounded quite so fully-formed as the SP200s.

Switching from Quad amplification to a Naim NAP 200DR showed the Spendors are not totally resolving. I'd expected a complete change in balance from the valve input to the resolutely transistor-based Naim – but it didn't quite happen.

The Naim brought more grip, added a little bit of tightness to the high-end – but it wasn't a night and day difference, indicating the SP200s were bringing their own characteristic to the party.

That characteristic is an exceptional low-end response, smooth treble and true, but not over-extended treble.

So via the Naim and The Flaming Lips 'Fight Song', the SP200s revealed an interesting conundrum. Opening crowd noise panned wide right and left, and when the bass kicked in a smile crept across my face. Wayne Coyle's vocals arrived with verve and definition but – and here's the one caveat – the SP200s did not have the sharpness of rivals boasting ribbon tweeters. Instead they gave a richer, warmer presentation. Not that there's anything wrong with this – just something to bear in mind.

Because once fired up I found it hard not to be beguiled by the sound these loudspeakers produce. It was big, detailed and – most importantly – easy to listen to over long periods of time.

Putting on Bruce Springsteen's epic 'Backstreets' I was immediately transported to the streets of New Jersey. The piano intro was sweet and tonally accurate, but as the guitar and drums came in, the music naturally swelled in seamless fashion. There was no evidence of stress or strain, just the feeling that the Spendors were driving the room with effortless ease and control. It was the sound of a big, confident loudspeaker doing exactly what it should.



Spendor's 22mm tweeter sits between the 'speakers two 12" bass units and the midrange unit.

OK, you are going to need fairly deep pockets to gain entrance to this level of sound, the Classic SP200s starting at £15000 for the standard cherry finish and rising to £17500 for special order dark ebony or rosewood cabinets. But for that you are getting a very special loudspeaker indeed – and one that you probably wouldn't want to change for the rest of your life.

CONCLUSION

Yes, they are big and yes, they are expensive. But the Spendor SP200s are also an absolutely glorious listen. What they do is make listening to music fun no matter what genre you prefer. As such they come unreservedly recommended.

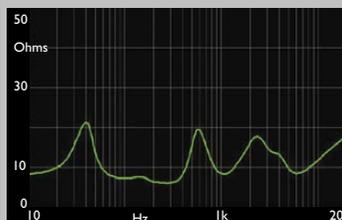
MEASURED PERFORMANCE

In spite of its size and many drive units, frequency response of the SP200 was surprisingly smooth and flat over most of the audio band our analysis shows, when measured on the tweeter axis. With good dispersion and phase matching it did not vary much over a wide forward angle either.

FREQUENCY RESPONSE



IMPEDANCE



Absence of small perturbations suggests well damped drive unit cones and low coloration. The tweeter is especially smooth and peak free and there's no crossover dip, so rendition of detail will be strong.

At low frequencies the two 12in bass units do, however, lift output substantially by +5dB, giving the SP200 obviously strong bass. Output is maintained down to a low 30Hz, ensuring strong subsonics from the two 12in bass units; there is no port. Below this frequency output falls quickly.

Sensitivity was high at 89dB from one nominal Watt (2.8V) of input but since the SP200 has an unusually high impedance of 10 Ohms it actually draws little power. Our impedance curve shows this clearly, sitting around the 10 Ohm datum.

In spite of its size the SP200 is both smooth and accurate under measurement, ignoring raised bass output from the two large bass units. It is easy to drive, needing little power, around 40 Watts being ample. **NK**

SPENDOR SP200 £15000



OUTSTANDING - amongst the best .

VERDICT

Powerful bass and smooth treble, allied to a propulsive thrust that just draws you into the music.

FOR

- bass response
- tonal balance
- sheer musicality

AGAINST

- deep pockets needed

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