

KEN MICALLES

Spendor Audio Systems A7

LOUDSPEAKER

As *Stereophile's* lone New York City bachelor, I sometimes search for *amore* on Internet dating sites. One such encounter led me to Park Slope, Brooklyn, where I met a woman who, I soon learned, was at the top of the food chain of Manhattan's gold-encrusted arts community.

The single child of an upper-Westchester family, Jane So (not her real name) assists her employer in curating fine art for the city's premier galleries and museums. Her job also includes gifting her employer's millions to charitable organizations and the like. But in her off hours, when the boss isn't watching, Jane enjoys a bit of kink. As she told me over dinner, "Ken, I'm not looking for anything serious. I have several men who visit me during the week."

It dawned on me: I had stumbled into New York's subterranean sex world.

Back in her new high-rise apartment, Jane pegged me as "nice guy," and she spoke candidly on a number of topics. About sex clubs. About her fretful family. About how her every move was followed, via a 24-hour tracking device. And then she added: "But my ex-husband is an avid *Stereophile* reader, and he'd love to meet you!" And we walked the five blocks to her ex's apartment. (I'm not making this up!)

Jane's ex's system included an SME turntable, a McIntosh amplifier, and a pair of Spendor SP1/2s—loudspeakers I'd briefly owned in the late 1990s. He was happy to meet a fellow audiophile. But I was nervous—his dog was growling at me. *Now* what had I stumbled into?

The SP1/2 was cut from the same cloth as Spendor's classic BC1 studio monitor from the 1970s.¹ I'd thought the SP1/2s made music sound a little buttoned-up and tight-fitting, but generally they were so listenable across the board that I kept my pair for a year before graduating to floorstanders from ProAc. Jane changes men. I change speakers.

¹ See www.stereophile.com/content/spendor-bc-1-loudspeaker.



SPECIFICATIONS

Description Two-way, reflex-loaded, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 7/8" (22mm) wide-surround dome tweeter with fluid cooling, 7.1" (180mm) polymer-cone midrange-woofer. Crossover frequency: 3.7kHz. Frequency range: 32Hz–25kHz. Sensitivity: 88dB.

Impedance: 8 ohms nominal. Power handling: 25–200W. Terminals: four-way binding posts (single-wired). **Dimensions** 36.8" (934mm) H by 7.1" (180mm) W by 12" (305mm) D. Weight: 39.7 lb (18kg). **Finishes** Black Ash, Cherry, Natural Oak, Dark Walnut,

Satin White. **Serial numbers of units reviewed** 334A00011/12. **Price** €3998 each. Approximate number of dealers: 40. **Warranty:** 5 years. **Manufacturer** Spendor Audio Systems Ltd., Ropemaker Park, Hailsham, East Sussex BN27 3GY,

England, UK. **Tel:** (44) (0)1323-843-474. **Web:** www.spendoraudio.com. **US distributor:** Bluebird Music, 1100 Military Trail, Kenmore, NY 14217. **Tel:** (416) 638-8207. **Fax:** (416) 638-8115. **Web:** www.bluebirdmusic.com.

That sordid tale still fresh in my mind, I was pleased when John Atkinson accepted my pitch to review the A7, the new floorstander in Spendor's newish A line. A simple coincidence? Synchronicity? Jane . . . ?

A clean mind, a clean speaker

Launched in 2017, Spendor's A line of reasonably priced models includes the A1 stand-mount speaker (€695 each) and three floorstanders: the A2 (€999 each), A4 (€1395 each), and, introduced in February 2018, the A7 (€1949 each).

Designing, manufacturing, and hand-assembling their products in Hailsham, in East Sussex, England, Spendor is one of the few speaker makers with its own cabinetmaking plant. In business now for half a century, Spendor also produces its own midrange and bass drivers and, for some models, its own tweeters.

The A7 is a revision of Spendor's long-running and popular A6R model. Upgrades include a 7.1" mid-woofer with an EP77 polymer cone, and surround and suspension materials used in Spendor's flagship D7 model; a reengineered crossover with "precision wound, high-linearity tapped inductors," which reportedly smack down nasty distortions; a 7/8" (22mm) silk-dome tweeter with a wide surround, made by a third party; Spendor's proprietary Dynamic Damping; and internal wiring of pure, silver-plated copper. The A7's most unusual feature is its larger-than-average, rectangular, rear-firing, "4th generation . . . Linear Flow port," which reportedly performs better than a tubular port.

"The A7 port is much larger than a conventional tubular reflex port," wrote Spendor's CEO, Philip Swift, via e-mail. "It is asymmetrical in cross section and specifically positioned close to one room boundary (your floor). It also helps to maintain a very rigid cabinet structure. The advantages of our Spendor Linear-Flow port technology are significantly reduced air velocity and pressure in the port zone and a freedom from internal port resonance, which deliver higher headroom and lower distortion than any conventional 'port'."

Internally, as well as bracing, the A7's enclosure has several layers of what appears to be foam rubber. "The [internal damping] material in the A7 is a new high-damping coefficient polymer," Swift told me. "It's a rubber-like material (not foam) and it behaves very differently to any conventional natural or synthetic 'rubber' or foam. Small damping blocks are incorporated at strategic energy interface points within the cabinet structure, they are not visible." I assumed these elements comprise Spendor's "proprietary Dynamic Damping system," mentioned but not described in detail on the company's website.

Swift went on to say that the tweeter's "unique dome profile combines the extended frequency response of a small diaphragm with the low-frequency characteristics of a larger diaphragm to give stable low-distortion response over a very wide frequency range. It delivers a smooth extended high-frequency response over a very wide listening area. It specifically avoids (undesirable in a typical listening room) ultra-wide dispersion and the bright aggressive sound of many modern loudspeakers, which is caused by strong high-frequency wall reflections."

Of the new 7.1" midrange-woofer, Swift wrote that "the advantage of our EP77 polymer cone . . . [with its] new surround and suspension materials is [its] exceptionally low residual energy storage and break-up, which allows the A7 to deliver clear, natural sound with all types of recordings at all listening levels."

Standing 36.8" high by 7.1" wide by 12" deep, the A7s looked fantastic in my listening den. Not only is it the best-looking speaker ever to grace my creepy-crawly bachelor crib, I soon learned that the A7 is perhaps one of the speakers best suited to this smallish space. Its superstraight, sharply cut lines and lovely oak finish brought much-needed lightness to my room.

Setup

Unfortunately, the A7s were very persnickety as to where they would and wouldn't sing. During the 2018 New York Audio Show last November, Spendor's US distributor, Blue-

MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Spendor A7's frequency response in the farfield, and an Earthworks QTC-40 mike for the nearfield responses. The Spendor's specified sensitivity is 88dB/2.83V/m; my estimate was close, at 87.1dB(B)/2.83V/m. The specified impedance is 8 ohms. Fig.1 shows that the A7's impedance magnitude (solid trace) remains above 8 ohms for the entire treble and most of the low bass. The minimum magnitude was a still-high 6.1 ohms at 228Hz, and while the electrical phase angle is sometimes high, this is always when the impedance is also high, mitigating any drive difficulty.

There is a small peak between 100

and 200Hz in the impedance-magnitude trace, but I found no enclosure problem in that region when I investigated the panels' vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer. I did find some resonant modes on the sidewalls, the front baffle, and the rear panel. However, these were all relatively low in level, and the most significant modes—on the sidewalls, 12" from the base (fig.2)—were high enough in frequency and Quality factor (Q) to have no audible consequences.

The impedance-magnitude plot has the expected low-frequency saddle indicating the tuning of the port. The blue trace in fig.3 shows the woofer's nearfield response—it has a minimum-motion notch at 39Hz, which is when the back pressure from the port

resonance holds the cone stationary. The ports' nearfield response (red trace) peaks slightly higher in frequency, and its upper-frequency rolloff is disturbed not only by three resonances in the midrange but also by

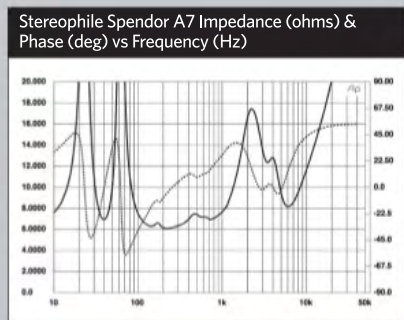


Fig.1 Spendor A7, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

bird Music, sent more-than-able setup man Chris Morris to my place, and dagnab it if he didn't make the A7s sing right away. Morris showed me how each A7's four floor spikes, which screw into a separate plate that fastens to the speaker's base, enabled rake, cabinet stability, and solid coupling with the floor.

But the next day, the speakers sounded unfocused. So I moved them. Then I moved them some more. You know the drill: too close to the front wall, and bass frequencies boomed all pulpy and bloody; too far out into the room, and treble goblins attacked and coherence was lost. Finally, I found the perfect spots: the speakers ended up slightly toed in and with their rear panels 29" from the front wall. I moved them no more. Now, the A7s' treble frequencies perfectly aligned with their more-than-adequate midrange and bass capabilities.

For this review, I played LPs with Kuzma's magnificent combo of Stabi turntable and Stogi tonearm with Hana EL cartridge into Luxman's EQ-500 phono stage, the signals then sent via Triode Wire Labs Spirit II interconnects to a Heed Audio Elixir integrated amplifier, a combination of Mytek Brooklyn DAC/preamp and Mytek Brooklyn amplifiers, the latter bridged for mono, or a Parasound Halo HINT 6 integrated.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Among the policies set forth for Stereophile's reviewers is the mandate that, in every review, the product being tested is the only variable in the reviewer's reference system—how else can one accurately assign credit for distinctions heard?—and the additional requirement that every other product in that system must, at one time or another, have been reviewed in Stereophile's pages: thus the reader can enjoy at least a provisional frame of reference. But we stumbled in preparing this review: When we requested the loan of Parasound's



The Spendor A7's proprietary drive-units



well-known Halo integrated amplifier, which had been reviewed by Herb Reichert in November 2015, they kindly complied—by loaning us its replacement, the new Parasound Halo HINT 6. The distinction escaped our notice until *The Last Minute*—ie, the moment at which I'm writing this apology—and we promise to up our game. (And yes, you can expect a Follow-Up report on the HINT 6 in an upcoming issue.)—Art Dudley

Listening with the Parasound

From beginning to end of the listening period, regardless of source or amplification, the Spendor A7s produced some of the most extended, tonally rich, and weighty frequencies ever to fill my room. Nor was there ever a dead zone or booming accent: bass frequencies were uniformly dispersed and endowed with outstanding touch and timing. Touch,

measurements, continued

a strong peak at 171Hz, this coincident with the impedance peak noted earlier. This mode is both strong and out of phase with the woofer's output—when I calculated the complex sum of the woofer and port responses in the ratio of their radiating areas, taking into account their different distances from a nominal farfield microphone position, there was a major notch centered on 171Hz. I suspect that, with the A7's woofer mounted close to the top of

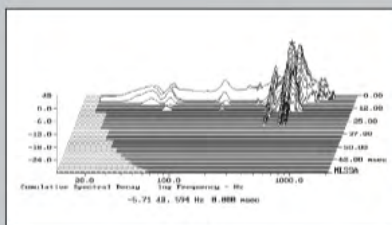


Fig. 2 Spendor A7, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to center of sidewall 12" from the floor (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

the baffle and the port at the base of the speaker's rear panel, there is some sort of organ-pipe resonance at this frequency. Ken Micallef didn't note any congestion in the upper bass; in fact, he was impressed by the solidity of the A7's bass and low-frequency extension. But this behavior might have been a reason he at first had some trouble

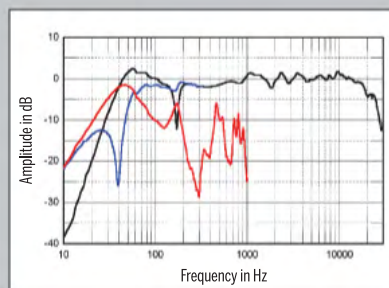


Fig. 3 Spendor A7, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer (blue) and port (red) responses and their complex sum (black), respectively plotted below 300Hz, 1kHz, and 300Hz.

sorting out the best positions for the Spendors in his room.

Higher in frequency in fig.3, the black trace shows the Spendor's farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis. It is impressively flat, with small peaks balanced by equally small dips. The plot of the A7's horizontal dispersion (fig.4) indicates that the speaker becomes relatively directional at the top of the woofer's passband,

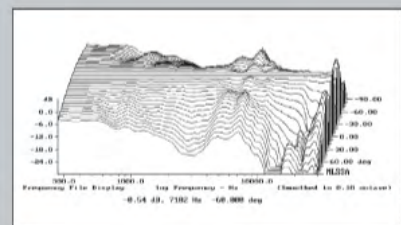


Fig. 4 Spendor A7, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off axis.

it would turn out, was one of the A7's strong suits. Those rear-firing ports must have been doing their job—I couldn't disrupt the speakers' low-end extension, whether playing digital or analog sources. And because I'm dissatisfied if I don't hear *every* last iota of bass information from a CD or LP, the A7s had me at the lead-in groove.

Case in point: Whether playing, via the Parasound Halo HINT 6 (\$2495) the Police's *Ghost in the Machine* (LP, A&M SP 3730), or Karl Berger and Dave Holland and Ed Blackwell's *Transit* (LP, Black Saint BSR 0092), or Willie Hutch's funk classic *Fully Exposed* (LP, Motown M 784V1), the A7s delivered the low-down, throbbing, subterranean heart of every recording exceptionally well and without exception. Sting's rich e-bass had never resounded so weighty and whole. The clarity of Dave Holland's double bass on *Transit* was a veritable master class in walking bass. And the titanic tonnage of Motown bassist Lawrence Dickens on *Fully Exposed* was dense and rock-solid via the A7. Call me sated.

On the Back Page of this issue I review John Coltrane's *1963: New Directions* (5 LPs, Verve AVER 10701). This set of remasterings provided a wide range of challenges with which to gauge the A7. Johnny Hartman's creamy voice in "They Say It's Wonderful" contrasted beautifully with Coltrane's glowing tenor sax and drummer Elvin Jones's glistening brushwork, with large if not huge images appearing on a soundstage of respectable depth and breadth. Trane, in particular, sounded sweet and relaxed, the A7s allowing the recorded sound a solid, immediate, and very physical presentation. The A7 consistently took first place in the naturalness sweepstakes. At times, the upper frequencies of the saxophone and McCoy Tyner's piano sounded a mite *tight* in absolute terms. But Jimmy Garrison's double bass was consistently fleshy and chewy, and exceptionally rich.

As with Willie Hutch's *Fully Exposed*, I've been digging deep into the 1970s LPs of my recently departed brother-in-law, a wonderful human being gone too soon. Andy, a Brit, particularly loved dub, reggae, and R&B, and as I clean and sort his collection, I'm happily surprised at the records' condition. I love spinning Andy's '70s R&B titles, chock full of swooning orchestras, cooing female harmonies, and sticky-funky rhythm sections. Through the A7s, Barry White and the Love Unlimited Orchestra's score for the 1974 film *Together Brothers* (LP, Pye International NSPL 28203) rose up before me like a Broadway production, its swimming strings, choogling rhythm section, and forward-motion funk a full-on festival. The A7 resolved the record's epic studio soundfield with speed and excitement, the low end driving the music but never at the expense of the upper frequencies, which were clean and revealing yet never analytical. I noted a touch of treble *zing!* in strings and guitars, but heard no harshness or grit and experienced zero fatigue.

The A7s also reproduced the interwoven acoustic and electronic tableaux of Police's *Ghost in the Machine* as practically a real-life event, with drummer Stewart Copeland's two-and-four snare-drum *crack!* practically visible, and the immense weight of the studio production as thrilling to me as I imagine hearing an opera live in the opera house is for others. Here was a superbly tactile, meaty, and immersive sound. With disc after disc, the A7s produced solid images with lightning-fast delivery and impressive physicality—I could feel each instrument's unique texture in space.

Switching gears but staying with the Halo HINT 6, I played tenor saxophonist Noah Preminger's *Some Other Time* (LP, Newvelle NV003LP). This 2014 recording, tweaked to Newvelle Records' immaculate standards, only further confirmed the A7's character traits. The center fill

measurements, continued

with then a slight off-axis flare in the bottom octave of the tweeter's passband. This behavior might lend the balance a touch of brightness in small and/or underdamped rooms—perhaps it correlates with KM's "touch of treble zing! in strings and guitars." In the vertical plane (fig.5), a sharply defined suckout at 3.9kHz develops 10° above the tweeter axis, confirming the specified crossover frequency of 3.7kHz. With the speaker on spikes, the

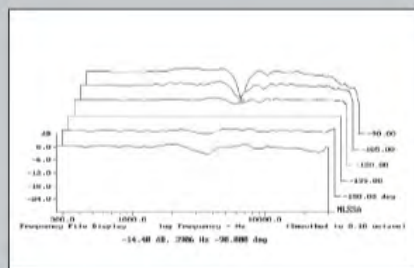


Fig.5 Spendor A7, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 15–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5–10° below axis.

tweeter is a low 34.5" above the floor; listeners should not sit too high.

Turning to the time domain, the A7's step response (fig.6) indicates that its tweeter is connected in inverted acoustic polarity, the woofer in positive polarity. This is a "very English" step response: the tweeter's step has almost fully decayed by the time the woofer's step arrives at the mike. (Ever since the BBC's classic LS3/5a of the mid-1970s, many British two-way speakers

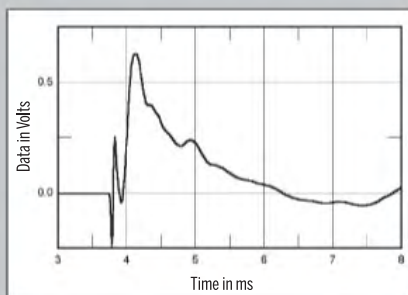


Fig.6 Spendor A7, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

have had similar step responses.) The Spendor's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.7) was generally clean, though with some low-level delayed energy at the top of the woofer's passband.

Other than that peculiar port resonance mode, the A7 offers good measured performance, as I have come to expect from Spendor and its team of managing director Philip Swift and the company's Technical Design Manager Terry Miles.—**John Atkinson**

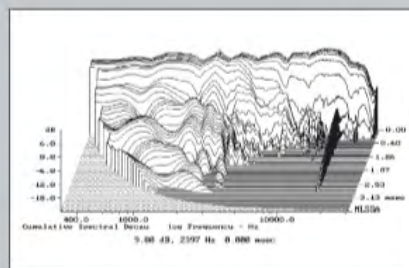


Fig.7 Spendor A7, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

of Preminger's tenor sax was first-rate, with uniformly crisp transients; Billy Hart's cymbals rolled and danced across the stage, Ben Monder's holographic guitar hung before me like a giant reverberating butterfly, and John Patitucci's double bass was ripe but not *too* ripe, the A7s punching out every bit of fingers-on-strings touch and tangibility.

Opting for the BorderPatrol DAC (\$995) and using the LG player as the source of digital data, I spun Pat Metheny's *One Quiet Night* (CD, Warner Bros. 48473-2). Metheny's shimmering acoustic guitars sounded entirely clean and luminous.

... with the Heed Audio Elixir integrated amplifier

Fed by the rich-sounding Heed Audio Elixir integrated amplifier (\$1195), the A7's traits remained similar, but now with lushness to the fore. The Heed warmed the A7's already excellent bass characteristics, and though the Hungarian integrated isn't the last word in resolution, it knows how to boogie, swing, and dance.

Preminger's *Some Other Time* sounded more diffuse through the Heed-Spendors than through the Parasound-Spendors, but also more immediate and friendly. Preminger's tenor was still huge, dead center in the mix, but Hart's cymbals were now more subdued than they'd sounded through the brilliantly detailed Parasound. I concluded that the A7 was simply exposing everything upstream: the good, the different, the whole megillah.

The Heed presented an overall creamier-sounding whole. *Ghost in the Machine* remained deep of soundstage and bass extension, and Copeland's snare drum *cracked* in front of me just as mightily as it had with the Halo. There was less layering of instruments on a smaller stage, but what remained was solid and propulsive, thanks to the A7.

Through every amplifier, with every recording, the A7 wowed me with its remarkably natural reproduction skills. Lesser speakers can make music sound processed, with shrunken heads, a sterile midrange, and plastic-brittle beats. The A7 found the ever-physical sweet spot in everything I played, on LP or CD.

Via the Heed, Dave Holland's double bass grew wrier, in a good way—*Transit* seemed to have more air. So did one of my current favorite recordings, Diana Krall and Tony Bennett's *Love Is Here to Stay* (CD, Verve B0028703-02). This album takes you deep into the musicians' lair—you can hear the depth of the recording studio, and where the microphones are placed for Peter Washington's double bass and Kenny Washington's drums—and though the two singers are up front in the mix, it all sounds thoroughly genuine, without artifice. Double bass was large, with full-scale force. Again, the A7s brought out all of the singers' *human* qualities—all their flesh and blood.

... with the Mytek Brooklyn DAC and Brooklyn Amplifier(s)

Mytek's Brooklyn DAC/preamp (\$1995), with two of their Brooklyn amplifiers (\$2495 each) in bridged mode, resolved information as class-D amps should: with merciless focus on speed and clarity, and less attention paid to color saturation or editorializing. The Mytek sound takes some getting used to, but once in its realm, you're hearing the music unadulterated.

The Spendors feasted on the Myteks, but poor recordings sounded poor. Thankfully, The Great Jazz Trio's *Milestones* (LP, Inner City IC 6030) is a landmark jazz recording—these vibrant performances by pianist Hank Jones, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams are timeless.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Sources Kuzma Stabi S turntable & Stogi S tone-arm; Thorens TD 124 turntable & Jelco TS-350S tonearm; Denon DL-103, Hana EL, Ortofon Quintet Bronze cartridges.

Digital Sources Apple MacBook computer running Audirvana Plus; Mytek Brooklyn DAC+, BorderPatrol DAC, Halide DAC HD DACs; LG BD550 BD player; Western Digital T2 Mirror Drives (2).

Preamplification Auditorium 23 A23 moving-coil step-up transformer, Luxman EQ-500 phono stage, Shindo Laboratory Allegro preamplifier, Schiit Audio Valhalla 2 headphone amplifier.

Power Amplifiers Mytek Brooklyn, Shindo Laboratory Haut-Brion.

Integrated Amplifiers Heed Audio Elixir, Parasound HINT 6.

Loudspeakers DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93, Elac Debut B6, Quad S-2.

Headphones Master & Dynamic MH40.

Cables Digital: Mytek (USB). Interconnect: AudioQuest Water, Auditorium 23, JPS Labs Superconductor, Shindo Laboratory, Triode Wire Labs Spirit II. Speaker: AudioQuest Castle Rock, Auditorium 23, Tellurium Q Black, Triode Wire Labs American. AC: manufacturers' own.

Accessories IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius line conditioner, Mapleshade Clearview Double Helix Mk.II power strip; Music Hall Aztec Blue & Mooo record mats, Spec AD-UP1 Analog Disc Sheet; Salamander five-tier rack; IKEA Aptitlig bamboo chopping boards (under preamp, power amps); Mapleshade maple platform (15" by 12" by 2", under turntable), mahogany blocks (2" by 2" by 0.5"); 3"-thick studio-treatment foam damping (ceiling, walls). Listening Room 12' L by 10' W by 12' H, system set up along long wall; suspended wood floor, 6"-thick walls (plaster over 2x4), wood-beamed ceiling. —Ken Micallef

When Williams ignites his double-fisted, thunderous tom assault in the title track, his resonant bass drum LOUD like Jo Jones pumped on swing steroids, the A7 ramped up dynamic levels to meet him, explosion for explosion. Perfecting its tactile, effortless approach, with lovely air atop and powerful bass below, the Spendor A7 easily made its case as one of the finest speakers for enjoying jazz this side of Greg Roberts's Volti Audio Rivals!

Conclusions

As if custom-made for me, the pair of Spendor A7s was the perfect fit for my smallish listening room. Everything they touched came out clear and lucid, and bass frequencies were especially tuneful, tight, and extended. Disc after disc, music flowed with ease and aplomb from the A7s' lovely cabinets. Though not as ultimately revealing of tone, texture, and low-end fundamentals as my DeVore Fidelity Orangutan O/93s, the Spendor A7s played crisply and cleanly, with a neutral midrange and revealing, powerful bass. I found very little to fault in the A7 and much to love, most notably its palpable and authentic presentation of everything from Willie Hutch's grooving soul to Dave Holland's aromatic, straight-ahead jazz. If I were in the market for a pair of floorstanding speakers costing about €1949 each, the Spendor A7 would take my cash. ■