

Spondor A4

Top of the 'A-Line', this compact and unassuming-looking floorstander boasts a deal of hidden refinements

Review: **David Price** Lab: **Keith Howard**

A generation or so ago, the British prided themselves on having subtle, understated good taste. But now, like the rest of the world it seems, many of us have developed a taste for all that is big, bright and shiny. Indeed, we have even adopted a new slang word for it – 'bling'. Hi-fi has not been immune to this new aesthetic, and loudspeakers – always a weathervane for the nation's cultural leanings – have played their part. The breed has become ever glossier and shinier, drawing our attention rather than blending harmoniously with domestic surroundings...

BRITISH RESERVE

However, for those wishing to stop the world and get off, there is Spondor. This company does not produce loudspeakers in exotic, heavily radiused shapes, with gallons of gloss lacquer sprayed all over, and festooned with sparkly silvery trim rings.

The £2195 A4 floorstander under review here is the epitome of traditional British reserve and its box-like cabinet comes in a choice of black ash, dark walnut and natural oak real wood finishes, while its plinth is finished in contrasting black satin.

Unobtrusively compact, and built in the UK, the A4 is a conventional reflex-ported two-way floorstander with Spondor's tried-and-trusted 'EP77' polymer used for the cone of its mid/bass unit. Alongside this, the 22mm polyamide dome tweeter is said to combine the extended frequency response of a small diaphragm, while its wide surround promises the low frequency characteristics of a larger diaphragm.

It sports a protective mesh grille to stop little fingers wreaking havoc, making it child – or grandchild – friendly. Both units are firmly bolted on to the speaker's baffle – again, no rebate, no rounded edges and all very reminiscent of designs from the UK speaker industry's golden years. Standing just over 83cm tall and weighing a mere

16kg, the speaker presents itself as short but sturdy. The asymmetrically braced cabinet is obviously well made, with dense sidewalls that sport Spondor's so-called Dynamic Damping inside. These are small, low mass constrained polymer dampers located at key 'energy points' within the cabinet while bonded viscoelastic damping panels are also used to dissipate vibration.

The base of the A4's cabinet accommodates four machined steel spikes that screw and secure directly into the main structure of the enclosure, keeping it very stable while also raising it another inch or so from the floor.

The company claims an 86dB sensitivity for the A4 [but see KH's Lab Report, p65] and while this isn't a stellar figure even for a smallish floorstander this loudspeaker

certainly took a fair amount of power for it to get really going. So it's not an ideal partner for a low-powered valve amp (to put it kindly), and hence you really need a sturdy solid-state design with

a ready 100W per side here. Spondor also says that the speaker can be used quite close to a rear wall, although we found that it was at its best at least 30cm away. Set much closer, and you're opening the door to room-boom!

NATURAL CHARM

We used Devialet Expert 800s in editor PM's listening room, which was not the overkill you might imagine. Moreover – and considering the A4's limited cabinet volume – the loudspeaker sounds more than reasonably extended at the low end. There's no mistaking Spondor's new A4 for an equivalently priced KEF, Focal or B&W. It has its own distinct family sound

RIGHT: Spondor's A4 cabinet employs small 'constrained polymer dampers' at key points to control panel resonances. The 180mm mid/bass unit has an EP77 polymer cone and is matched to a 22mm polyamide dome tweeter

'In a world of glitzy and showy speakers, the A4 remains desirable'





HOME ON THE RANGE

Sussex-based Spendor has three loudspeaker ranges, all of which are designed and manufactured in the United Kingdom. These are the 'A-Line', 'D-Line' and 'Classic-Line'. The latter comprises the company's traditional range, apparently very popular in Far Eastern export markets, and although ostensibly '1970s' in appearance, this Classic-Line still employs the company's latest technology and manufacturing practices [HFN Aug '16]. The D-line is the flagship range of modern Spendor loudspeakers, while the A-line is the affordable, contemporary-styled range. The A4 reviewed here is the larger floorstander in a three-strong lineup that also includes the two-way A1 standmount at £1095 and £1595 'mini two-way floorstanding' A2. The £2195 A4 is still reasonably diminutive by contemporary standards but its compact dimensions are aimed to provide a good fit with modestly-sized UK listening rooms.

and one which is really rather nice, in an unerringly pleasing way. This loudspeaker never seeks to impress you, to flirt with you or bowl you over.

Instead it has a natural, understated charm that makes pretty much any type of music agreeable and enjoyable. Rather like a well-made pair of walking boots, it falls into the role of being a utilitarian object that performs an important task without attracting attention. In today's world of glitzy, glamorous, showy or even overblown loudspeakers, that makes the Spendor A4 quite unusual, but no less desirable for many prospective purchasers.

SEAMLESS AND BALANCED

It is easy to detail the A4's various limitations – the lack of very deep bass, the limited maximum loudness and also the slight lack of brilliance to the treble. Neither is its imaging exceptional or its soundstage especially deep or ambient. There's also a degree of boxy coloration to the sound – just a little – and the speaker has a tendency to sound compressed at high volumes.

Yet one gets the sense that these were all compromises the designer were prepared to make, to achieve the immensely enjoyable midband that the A4 delivers, and its pleasing sense of seamlessness and balance.

As with most things in life, every loudspeaker is a compromise – but the trick is knowing when and how to rob Peter to pay Paul. Here, it's very clear that Spendor has got the balance right – considering the sort of audiophile it is selling to. So while my first few minutes with the A4 proved a tad underwhelming, this was most certainly not my long-term impression.

The A4, you see, is a real grower. For example, Peter Gabriel's 'Slowburn'

[from *Peter Gabriel*; Virgin PGCDP 1], which is a very dry sounding rock recording from the mid-1970s, initially seemed a little dull and unremarkable through the A4s, but as the track progressed I found myself settling down and enjoying it rather more than I had previously thought I would.

There was a lot of midband detail and a pleasant, liltingly musical gait to the way the rhythms were handled. The upper bass was a little warm and there was a subtle sense of coloration to the sound – it was slightly boxy, as I've said, but in a pleasant sort of way.

Peter Gabriel's voice was delivered in a surprisingly intimate manner, the speaker giving a real feel for his phrasing and intonation, gliding engagingly through the song. Yet when I tried to steal my attention back to the 'hi-fi' aspects of the sound, things took a turn for the worse. The tambourine sounded rather generic and cymbals lacked sheen. The triangle playing was enjoyably rhythmic but didn't sparkle. Again though, I was drawn back to the song's *emotional* power, the singer's voice and the melodic and expressive electric guitar sound.

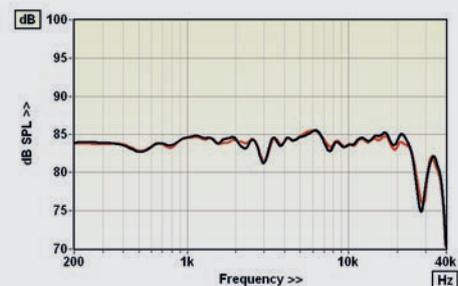
Better recordings – and I listened, for example, to the jazzy strains of Fourplay's 'Turnabout' [from *X*; Bluebird 82876 86399-2] – tell us more about the A4. Bear in mind that Spendor's A4 is a fairly open and detailed sounding speaker, but is no more incisively transparent than many other designs at this price point. It has that pleasant, gentle, warm coloration – almost as if you've turned the heating up a touch and things suddenly feel rather warm and sumptuous.

So while Fourplay's recording is very smooth, the A4 added a dash more colour in the upper bass, helping the

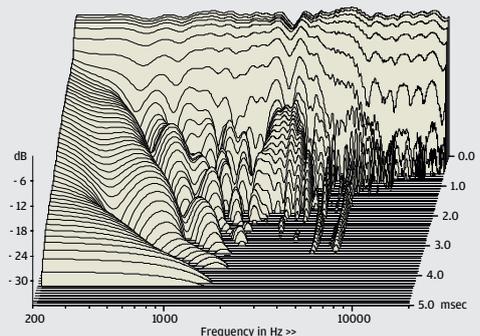
SPENDOR A4

Rarely at *HFN* do we encounter passive loudspeakers with on-axis frequency responses anywhere near as flat as Spendor's A4 [Graph 1, below]. Response errors for the review pair were just $\pm 2.2\text{dB}$ and $\pm 2.0\text{dB}$, respectively, and but for the narrow dip at 3kHz would have been more like $\pm 1.5\text{dB}$, making the A4's frequency response the flattest we've measured from any loudspeaker in recent years, whether passive or active. It's a remarkable achievement, backed up by a tight pair matching error of $\pm 0.8\text{dB}$ over the same 200Hz-20kHz. Spendor claims an 86dB sensitivity for the A4 but our measured pink noise figure of 84.0dB, averaged for the two speakers, suggests that this is about 2dB optimistic. But payback comes in two ways...

First, the A4 is a notably easy loudspeaker to drive compared to most of its competitors. It is a true 8ohm design, with a minimum modulus of 6.0ohm. The impedance phase angles are quite high but this high modulus ensures that the EPDR (equivalent peak dissipation resistance) never drops below 3.0ohm, dipping to a minimum of 3.1ohm at 96Hz and again to 3.2ohm at 927Hz. Compare this with the 1.7ohm we typically measure from high-sensitivity floorstanders. Second, the A4 has excellent bass extension for its modest size. Our diffraction-corrected nearfield measurement showed the LF extension to be a fine 38Hz (-6dB re. 200Hz) whereas many higher-sensitivity competitors average around 55Hz, half an octave higher. Harmonic distortion was audible at 100Hz at 90dB SPL and the cumulative spectral decay waterfall [Graph 2] indicates that the aforementioned 3kHz response dip is associated with a bass-mid driver breakup resonance. KH



ABOVE: The A4's forward response is one of the flattest we've measured. Bass extension is good too



ABOVE: Cabinet resonances are mild but a mode in the bass/mid driver at 3kHz shows in the response

HI-FI NEWS SPECIFICATIONS

Sensitivity (SPL/1m/2.83Vrms - Mean/IEC/Music)	84.2dB/84.0dB/84.1dB
Impedance modulus min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	6.0ohm @ 213Hz 56.4ohm @ 62Hz
Impedance phase min/max (20Hz-20kHz)	-57° @ 72Hz 57° @ 1.4kHz
Pair matching/Response error (200Hz-20kHz)	$\pm 0.8\text{dB}$ / $\pm 2.2\text{dB}$ / $\pm 2.0\text{dB}$
LF/HF extension (-6dB ref 200Hz/10kHz)	38Hz / 27.8kHz/36.6kHz
THD 100Hz/1kHz/10kHz (for 90dB SPL/1m)	1.9% / 0.4% / 0.4%
Dimensions (HWD)	831x165x275mm

LEFT: Precision-wound inductors and 'audio grade' capacitors are used in the (3.7kHz) crossover but this is not split to allow bi-wiring or bi-amping

Night Nurse; Island Records RRCD 9] proved this with its bouncy, sunny slice of early-'80s reggae and shuffling rhythms, courtesy of the legendary Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare. The A4 really became enjoyable, even at fairly high sound pressure levels.

True, bass was a little light right low-down, but that aside the A4 proved great fun with Isaacs' vocal carried in a close and intimate way, beautifully syncopated with the lead keyboards. The song came over just as it should: a sweet, enjoyable foot-tapper with a wonderful groove that pulls you right in.

ALL OF A PIECE

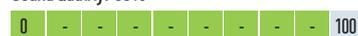
This is the A4's stock-in trade and a pleasant dalliance with Dexy's *Midnight Runners*' 'Geno' [from *Searching For The Young Soul Rebels*; EMI DEXYS 20] showed the same. It served up a great lead vocal, smooth yet vibrant saxophone sound and had a highly satisfying musical flow.

It fared pretty well with a short classical selection too, including Mahler's *Symphony No 9* [LSO/Gergiev; LSO Live LSO730] which still sounded convincingly all of a piece despite lacking some depth and breadth. Indeed, for most of the time you won't find yourself focusing on the 'hi-fi' aspects of the sound, because the little Spendor A4 simply locks you into the wonderful natural flow of the music, and keeps you there transfixed. ☺

HI-FI NEWS VERDICT

The Spendor A4 does what it says on the tin, so to speak. It's a compact floorstander with no gimmicks or pretence. It doesn't try to be a radical new departure in speaker design, sticking instead to the classic Spendor formula of making a pleasingly lyrical sound that pulls you into whatever type of music you choose, and keeps you entertained. It looks discreet and unprepossessing, yet oozes quality through and through.

Sound Quality: 83%



bass guitar line underpin things just a bit more than with some rivals – a not unpleasant effect.

Indeed the midband shone out as this speaker's crowning jewel, for it really seemed to relish throwing out a good deal of rhythmically coherent detail. You'd never call the A4 a 'mid-forward' design but I found the sound to be articulate and tonally polished – just as it should be. Pushing up the volume let me focus in on the fine, expressive guitar work, but as things got louder that slight sense of compression began to set in. The A4 can do high volumes in a largish room with some small complaint, but it's not its natural habitat.

That's not to say it's an over-polite, dynamically limited loudspeaker in the mould of some designs from the '70s. Gregory Isaacs' 'Cool Down The Pace' [from