

JUNE 2005 Issue 15

AVguide MONTHLY



ACHTUNG BABY!
Awesome Vincent
Amp from Germany

3 HD PLASMAS

...you can afford



Reviewed!

**DELL
LG Electronics
V, INC.**



NIRO REFERENCE
5.1 Channels
from 1.1 Speakers?



SPENDOR S8e
Loudspeakers

HK's CP 35 System
Separates Made Simple!



REGA P5
Turntable

INFINITY'S TSS-4000 5.1 SURROUND SYSTEM

Features

03 From the Editor

04 Letters

Tip:

The TABLE OF CONTENTS IS INTERACTIVE, simply click a product to jump to the review!

Reviews

06



Dell W4200HD, LG Electronics DU-42PX12X, V, Inc. VIZIO P42HD

HD Plasmas at Breakthrough Prices

Randy Tomlinson

13



Infinity TSS-4000 5.1-Channel Speaker System

Stylin' Speakers for Film Fanatics

Chris Martens

17



Rega P5 Turntable & Exact Phono Cartridge

All Gain, NO Pain-Analog Delight

Jim Hannon

21



Niro Reference 5.1-Channel, Two-Enclosure Surround System

5.1 Channels from 1.1 Speakers?

Jerry Sommers

24



Vincent SV-236 Hybrid Integrated Amplifier

Achtung! A Killer Integrated from Germany

Barry Willis

27



Harman Kardon CP 35 7.1-Channel Home Theater System

Surround Sound Separates Made Easy

Gary Altunian

31



Sendor S8e Loudspeakers

This British Tower's Got the Power

Sallie Reynolds

33

Manufacturer Comments

Spendor S8e Loudspeakers

This British Tower's Got the Power

Once I had the opportunity to explore the Great Organ at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. This Aeolian-Skinner's 8000 or so pipes live in two huge "attics" above the choir lofts on both sides of the main apse. I was taken up among them by the organ tuner, climbing through dusty spaces and across beams. His assistant played a note, and the tuner tapped at each pipe in turn. The experience was magical from start to finish, but two particular events stand out in my mem-

At the risk of sounding naïve and overblown, I'm going to give you my true thoughts on the Spendor S8e: Buy it.

ory. After the tuning was done, the assistant organist came in to play and I stood high over the ground floor, in the forest of treble and midrange pipes, from a tiny two or three inches to several feet in height, hearing truly organic sound for the only time in my life. At such close range, organ music gets through your skin and into your body, and moves around in there. You can barely make out a melody and really you don't care, any more than you care what's on your car radio when you go into a skid—the fact that sound accompanies your physical experience will be with you forever, but the actual music is unimportant. (I started to say "incidental" till I recollected the musical connotation of that word.) The second event was when I

stood in front of the 32' pedal pipe—a great wooden box, tall and broad, with a maw of an opening. The organist called out: "Now!" And I heard—nothing. But my skirt blew in the wind from that opening. Then, long seconds later and a hundred feet behind me, came the note. Not the fundamental, but a harmonic, booming and shaking. And then, in a few moments, the organist filled the entire cathedral with glorious layers of the sound of Clarke's Trumpet Voluntary.¹

I recount this because it is the kind of sonic experience you won't get from even the largest, finest audio system in the world. It serves as a reminder that the real musical event, no matter how grand or modest, to this day escapes exact reproduction. Twenty years ago, when I first got interested in audio, you could hardly even remind yourself of these events via a recording. But the recreation of musical memory is something we *can* obtain today. And done well, it carries with it the spirit, the feel, of the musical moment itself.

Re-creating Musical Memory

The surprise is that it doesn't take a fortune to do this. As I write, I am listening to John Balka play the Great Organ at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco on a Reference Recordings CD—through a fine, not terribly expensive system that includes the Spendor S8e speakers. This listening is what called up my memory of St. John the Divine and my experiences there among the pipes.

At the opening of the disc, there is first an organ-engine rumble as the instrument is fired up, and Clarke's Trumpet Voluntary rolls out, closely



miked and loudly played. It fills my room. It fills my memory. The Spendors' specifications say the speakers go down to at least 44Hz, but my guess is that that number is conservative. I didn't have a subwoofer in the system when I first listened, and a few moments later when I put in the REL Q-108E powered subwoofer, the difference was not night and day. The basis of every sound was clearly present without the sub. A few of the lowest growls took on melodic sense with the REL, but so satisfying is the S8e on its own, I did most of my listening without it. To my ear, these speakers are so good and so clear, they do not call for "support." When you need 30-20Hz, well, plug in the sub. But otherwise, don't bother. Don't own a sub? Never

mind. You'll hardly miss it.

Spendor speakers, among the heirs to the BBC true monitors of yore, have long been known for their gorgeous midrange and treble. The S8e has in addition a clean, clear, dramatic bass, even low bass. I played everything I could lay my hands on and loved every minute. For highs, there is the organ recording, of course (indeed, in a good organ recital, you should get the entire musical-frequency spectrum, since a large organ has a broader range than any other instrument); the highest treble notes are silvery and pure and send chills down your spine, against the background thunder, light and strong, of the rest of the organ. And then there's Joanna Newsome's harp [DC2C3CD], along with her imperfect but moving high voice. Odetta, in a recent recording put out by BeOne Loudspeakers in China and not available in this country, is now, in her late middle age, a powerful contralto. She can create thumps and overloads in a shy system when she really lets go. She didn't faze the Spendors. And all the musical layers in Leonard Cohen's reissue *The Essential Leonard Cohen* [Columbia] were present, clear and lovely. The high shaken instrument in "The Sisters of Mercy" that so easily loses its emotional and musical definition added the eerie sweetness that reminds you that this song is only half satirical. Oh yes, the Earth drum on Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum* [Ryko], a test for low-bass capacity, made the floor and walls tremble most satisfyingly.

The Spendors also create, or recreate, a wide, deep soundstage, and one whose height is satisfying with singers, who do not seem to be performing from a cue box on stage as with so many smallish speakers. The stage is at its best when the listener is in the sweet spot, but you can really be anywhere in the room and get a sense of being surrounded and enveloped in the music. Oh, and incidentally, the transition from driver to driver is beautifully inaudible. This is something I often hear, a small bump in the road, as it were, even in expensive systems, particularly, for some reason, when I'm

listening off-axis. The Spendors, however, are seamless. So much so I almost forgot to think about it.

I haven't much more to say, really. The Spendors may have shortcomings, but I did not find them. Clean, clear, transparent, detailed, allowing the flow of music to dance its continuous way through valleys, down thundering waterfalls, to sparkle on the grass, to pool in sweet melodies, these speakers seem complete and entirely wonderful to me.

Sonic Partners

I played the Spendors with the hefty and extraordinarily clear and balanced Musical Fidelity kW500 hybrid integrated amp, the MF X-150 integrated amp, the Myryad 140 integrated, and finally with the Myryad 140 plus an additional Myryad 160 amp, in biamp mode. The speakers did wonderfully with all. With more wattage, they are at their richest and most electrifying, in the musical sense. And play loud, I mean *loud*, without strain. The Musical Fidelity units were both a little cleaner and leaner than the Myryad, which made the music seem warmer and sweeter and presented all but the very harshest of recordings as pleasantly listenable. Both sounds, the lean and the plump, are lovely. I've no idea which is more "accurate." On recordings whose sessions I attended, I find the leaner more natural, but musical memory is, as I have indicated, a funny thing. The kW500 and the Myryad duo gave a greater sense of ease and air than the Myryad 140 alone or the X-150, but then most speakers, most systems, I dare say most recordings and most listeners, like a few extra watts.

The S8e's are easy to set up (I tried and then, against instructions, didn't use their floor spikes) and to place, following excellent guidance from the manual. They seem, in my room, to sound good without much fiddling. They did not need much, or really any, break in. I did not remove the grille cloths.

Lately, at the end of the day, as the sun is slipping into the pine shadows

behind my house, I have been playing an old CD, unmarked and of unknown provenance, of temple bells. This music of breath, of blowing winds, wakes the dog, makes the cat growl, sets the falcon to shaking his own little silver bell as if in answer. The sounds move with air, with breath, they shake my house. Finally, they set my feverish human brain at rest.

So. At the risk of sounding naïve and overblown, I'm going to give you my true thoughts on the Spendor S8e: Buy it. For \$3000 you are, I swear it, getting as close as a whisker to \$30,000 in sound. Glorious, house-filling sound.

1 This grand old organ is in serious disrepair. A \$2 million restoration campaign will help bring it back into mint condition. Organ lovers may send donations to the Great Organ Restoration Fund, c/o Music Department, 1047 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, New York 10025.

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION SPENDOR AUDIO SYSTEMS LTD

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SPECIFICATIONS

*Spendor S8e 2-way
floor-standing loudspeaker*

Frequency Response:

44Hz-20kHz +/- 3dB

Power Handling: 15-300 watts

Sensitivity: 89dB (1W/1m)

Nominal Impedance: 8 ohms

Driver Complement: one 1" fabric dome

tweeter, one 8.27" ep38 polymer woofer

Dimensions: 36.4 x 8.9 x 12.6 inches

Weight: 55.1 pounds

Price: \$2999

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

BeOne 306 loudspeakers, Musical Fidelity kW500 integrated amplifier, MF X-150 integrated, Myryad 140 integrated, Myryad 160 power amplifier, Musical Fidelity A5 CD player, Lector CDP 7DL CD player, Monster 3500 power-line conditioner, Nordost Blue Heaven speaker cables and interconnects

MANUFACTURER COMMENTS

Dell W4200HD 42" Plasma Television

Julie Metting, Dell Reviews Coordinator, writes: "Please note that promotional pricing is always changing. For example, this week, [April 22] the plasma is running for a promotional price of \$2799. Second, Randy mentioned that you cannot go to a store to view the picture quality before buying. To clarify, while Dell does not have stores, we do have kiosks in 14 states—all of which have plasma televisions. You can find more information at: <http://www1.us.dell.com/content/topics/segtopic.aspx/kiosk?c=us&cs=19&l=en&s=dhs>

Rega P5 Turntable

Elizabeth Daniels of The Sound Organisation writes: "Please thank Jim for a review that listened to the music—not just the metal, plastic and whatnot.

Spendor S8e 2-way Floor-Standing Loudspeakers

Philip Swift, Managing Director of Spendor Audio Systems, writes: "Your eloquent and beautifully illustrated review describes our new generation Spendor S8e loudspeakers perfectly. Sallie's conclusion speaks for itself. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment.