Spendor D9.2

CHRIS FRANKLAND GETS TO GRIPS WITH THIS NEW SPENDOR FLOORSTANDER AND – AFTER FALLING UNDER ITS SPELL – HOPES THAT THIS BIG SPENDOR WILL INDEED SPEND A LITTLE TIME WITH HIM

As I pulled away from Spendor's Hailsham factory with its recently launched D-Line flagship D9.2 floorstanders in the back of my trusty old Vauxhall Corsa, the look of disbelief on the faces of those who had helped me load them, that a speaker so large could fit into a car so small, was priceless.

Although the word is much overused these days, I do not hesitate to describe Spendor as one of the UK's truly iconic brands, founded by ex-BBC man Spencer Hughes in the late Sixties. But Spendor has moved with the times, under the guidance of ex-Audiolab boss Philip Swift, who took over in 2000.

In its East Sussex factory, it vacuum forms its own bass/midrange cones, energises the magnet assemblies, wires up the crossovers, and carries out all final testing. Cabinets are made in its own 26,000sq ft plant in Sheffield, which it acquired five years ago from REL. It also produces cabinets for around 15 to 20 other UK loudspeaker brands.

The original D9, and its smaller brother the D7, was launched in 2016. Both have now been updated and it is the £7,700 D9.2 that I am reviewing here.

The D9.2 is a tall, slim three-way four-driver design with Spendor's own 22mm LPZ polyamide domed tweeter, crossing over at 4.2kHz to a 180mm EP77 polymer cone midrange driver, with two 180mm Kevlar composite bass drivers handling everything below 500Hz. A tapered, twin-venturi reflex port exits at the bottom of the back panel.

So what has changed in the .2 variant? First, Spendor says there have been dramatic improvements to the cabinet's dynamic damping materials and how they are configured. It has rejected the idea of simply mass-damping the walls to control 'cabinet talk'. Instead, as it did in the D9 and has now refined in the D9.2, it uses small, low-mass polymer dampers at key energy interface points to control unwanted vibrations by turning them into heat. It also uses asymmetric cabinet bracing to help eliminate internal standing waves.

A 'silent' cabinet

Philip tells me that he hates the approach of simply stuffing a cabinet full of foam or wool as this slows the sound down. Spendor's approach, he says, ensures a 'silent' cabinet with a fast, engaging sound.

In the D9.2, Spendor has also refined its 180mm D-Line drivers. The midrange driver is an EP77 polymer cone and the LF drivers are a Kevlar® composite. Both use cast magnesium chassis and a high-efficiency motor system. The D9.2 drivers have new polymer surrounds with a 'very stable molecular composition' that are said to reduce driver break-in time significantly. During my chat with Philip, he emphasises how critical all of the interface points are in a driver design: surround to cone; cone to voice coil former; and voice coil former to suspension spider. All these areas have been critically refined by Spendor.

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I also ask him why he decided to make his own drivers and vacuum-form the cones in-house. He explained that he believes in a deeper cone profile than is commonly used, which he says has a more significant influence on rigidity than even the material used. He tells me that his chosen profile gives reduced break-up and less stored energy, and noted that in the vacuum-forming process, the cooling time is critical.

The polyamide-domed tweeter uses a stainless steel front plate that forms a damped acoustic chamber in front of the diaphragm. The plate also incorporates a phase-correcting micro-foil. Again, during our chat, Philip emphasises the importance of equalising pressure on both sides of a transducer.

Linear flow port

For the bass, he tells me how F1 diffuser technology was the inspiration for the linear-flow bass reflex port with its tapered profile and twin venturi. This is designed to make sure that air flow at the port extremities is smoothly decelerated, with evenly balanced pressure and flow along its length. He says this ensures lowered phase shift, controlled resonance Q and fast, coherent bass.

The crossovers are assembled using high-quality ferrite-cored inductors and plastic film capacitors (from a source he chooses not to reveal) mounted on their custom-made, dual-layer, gold-plated circuit board, with broad low resistance tracks. Each pair of finished speakers is then precisely calibrated and matched.

When Martin Colloms reviewed the D7 for HIFICRITIC (Jul-Sep 2013), I remember him saying that it was 'valve amplifier-friendly'. And indeed the D9.2 (and D7.2) also has a sensitivity of 90dB for 1W at 1 metre, which is pretty high.

So I felt confident that it would probably make a good pairing with my favourite amplifier of the moment, the Audio Note Meishu Phono Silver. When I quizzed Philip on this, he said he had designed the D9.2 and D7.2 to be an easy 8ohm load. But just in case, I also used my trusty old Naim NAC32.5/Hicap/2x NAP135s (fully factory refurbished, of course!), which should have more than enough heft, should the Meishu be found lacking. Source was the Audio Note TT3/Arm2/Io1 fed through an S9 transformer and into a Puresound P10 valve phono stage when used with the Naim. Also on hand was the Audio Note CD4.1x.

The large cabinets sit on sturdy spiked feet that screw into strong metal plates on the separate base plate. Philip made the point that it is no good having spiked feet screwed straight into the cabinet walls as this does not provide the rigidity required.

I was told the D9.2s are not overly fussy about room positioning. I started out with them around 10in , 25cm from the rear wall. The sound was well balanced, dynamic, open and tight and controlled at the bottom end. I could have lived with that. But because you should always experiment, I tried them 5in from the wall. That seemed to be the sweet spot. Bass was still full, without excess, and the midrange showed improved balance while the overall sound character was definitely improved in that position, here slightly toed-in towards the listener.

I started my listening using the Audio Note Meishu amp. From the first few bars, there was an ease, balance, poise and propulsion in the music that was instantly appealing and had me tapping my foot and relaxing to the D9.2s virtually straight away. Their sound was refined, detailed, smooth and yet dynamic and articulate and I was immediately struck by their lack of obvious vices.

Straight onto the turntable went one of my favourite albums from guitarist/vocalist Jonathan Butler, and I was immediately impressed by how the D9.2s conveyed the dynamics, note shape and voice of his guitar. Percussion and drums were detailed, dynamic and syncopated with plenty of subtle detail on cymbals, and bass lines tight, rhythmic and pacey.

My appetite was whetted and my curiosity piqued in terms of drums and so I had to reach for what, for me, is probably the finest drum solo I have ever heard from drum legend Steve Gadd, and it just happens to be on a Ben Sidran album (*The Cat and the Hat*) on the track *Seven Steps to Heaven*.

Gadd is really cooking on this, his playing ebbing and flowing, and the D9.2s ably conveyed its fluidity, subtlety and virtuosity. Drums were tight and powerful, sounding dynamic where they should be and yet subtle and delicate where they needed to be. It's all extremely impressive!

Favourite album followed favourite album as I continued to warm to the D9.2s. Hearing how they conveyed the amazing range, power and subtlety to Luther Vandross's soulful vocals was a delight, but they also handled the raw energy of Bruce Springsteen or John Mellencamp equally well. They were never phased by the blisteringly fast guitar playing of Al di Meola, and delighted me again with their poise, speed and delicacy on Jeff Porcaro's amazing drumming on the track *Rosanna*. My favourite sax players were also portrayed with power, good note shape and great subtlety of technique.

Whatever I threw at the D9.2s, they took in their stride. They were detailed, dynamic, subtle, pacey and free from obvious nasties. They just did it all superbly well and earned a place in my affections. But if the recording is flawed, don't expect them to hide it.

HIFICRITIC AUDIO EXCELLENCE

Spendor D9.2

Three-way floorstander, port-loaded	
Frequency response	27Hz – 25kHz
Power handling	250 watts
Sensitivity	90dB for 1W at 1m
Nominal impedance	8 ohms
HF driver	Spendor 22mm polyamide dome
MF driver	Spendor 180mm polymer cone
LF drivers	Spendor 180mm kevlar composite cone
Crossover frequencies	500Hz, 4.2kHz
Weight	35kg
Dimensions (HxWxD)	1125mm x 210mm x 403mm
Finishes	Black ash, cherry, dark walnut, natural oak, satin white
Mounting	Height-adjustable spiked feet
Price	£7,700

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