

Spendor SA1

The BBC-inspired, relaunched SA1 isn't cheap, but its loveable presentation won over our blind listening panel

DETAILS

ORIGIN:
UK

WEIGHT:
5.4kg

DIMENSIONS:
(WxHxD)
165x305x190mm

FEATURES:
• High-gloss lacquer finish

• Single pair high-quality terminals

• Magetically attached grille

• Special wide-surround tweeter

• Flush-mounted drive units

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Over the years Spendor has introduced a number of small sealed-box sub-miniatures inspired by the BBC LS3/5a. Its first design, christened the SA1 and with a squatter, dumper shape than a 3/5a, was launched in the mid-1970s. It was highly regarded, even though the company subsequently took out a license to produce the LS3/5a and this new SA1 revives the name, though not the shape of the original.

In fact, it's similar to a 3/5a dimensionally, albeit swapping over width and depth. Three alternative finishes include the rather bold lacquered zebrano of our samples, black piano lacquer, and a satin-finished wenge, while concealed magnets optionally hold the grille in place. The partnering stands (not supplied but worth investigating) have matching wood inlays in their central pillars. Critical bracing and three different thicknesses of relatively light and thin panels supply stiffness and resonance control while avoiding significant energy storage.

This sealed-box two-way has a new 150-millimetre Spendor bass/

mid drive unit with a 90mm ep38 polymer cone, a wide surround, a high-excursion motor with powerful magnet and (perhaps most significantly) it operates up to a high 4.8kHz. An unusual 22mm tweeter uses a small 19mm diaphragm and a 'proper' surround to extend its potential operating bandwidth. A single pair of high-quality WBT terminals feeds a refined crossover network using top-quality components and internal wiring.

At £1,275 this must be one of the most expensive sub-miniatures around, especially if you add a further £500 for the matching stands. Superficially, and as one of the smallest hi-fi speakers around, the SA1 looks a decidedly expensive prospect that might well struggle to justify its pricetag. However, it can be a mistake to prejudge a speaker by its pricetag or size, just as one should not judge a book by its cover.

Sound quality

That became clear when the listening test results were analysed and it became clear that the little Spendor, assisted by close-to-wall positioning, had come out comfortably ahead of the rest of the group.

A loudspeaker this small is bound to have certain limitations, in bass grunt, dynamic expression and above all in ultimate loudness capability. That's a given, but the strength of the SA1 is that it does everything within its capabilities remarkably well.

With a little help from the wall behind, it delivers a remarkably flat, smooth and even tonal balance right across the broad bass

and midband. Imaging is first class, with fine focus and reasonable depth rendition and coloration is

exceptionally low and notably free from boxiness. The extreme top end is sweet and attractively restrained, giving ample detail while avoiding drawing unwanted attention to itself.

The SA1 might appear to be very costly for such a small loudspeaker, but its superior standard of presentation and sound quality provides ample justification. It's a fine solution for those seeking high quality with minimal physical intrusion and who are prepared to accept some constraints on maximum loudness.

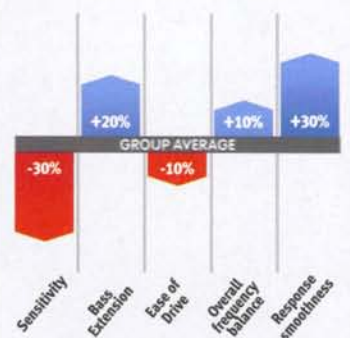
TECH LABS

LAB REPORT

Siting in free space away from walls will result in the flattest midband response, the lowest coloration and the best stereo imaging, though this does leave the bass octaves (sub-125Hz) decidedly lean. Moving the speakers close to a wall boosts the 50Hz-125Hz zone significantly, albeit not particularly smoothly, effectively extending the flat bandwidth down to 50Hz. Under our conditions, best results were obtained with a gap of about 25cm between speakers and wall. The top end shows some restraint above 3kHz, with a slight dip around 4kHz.

On our measurements, sensitivity was closer to 84dB, than the specified 85dB, but the impedance stays above six ohms throughout and is actually much higher than that through most of the range, so the speaker will benefit from ample volts, but won't require excessive current. The pair match is good between our two examples, with the sealed-box resonance around 88Hz.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY
★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY
★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY
★★★★★
PRACTICALITY
★★★★★

LIKE: Beautiful, even tonality with nicely judged top end
DISLIKE: Limited dynamic expression and loudness capability
WE SAY: A costly, but very high-quality sub-miniature with notably superior sound quality

OVERALL



Conclusions

The results from the blind listening panel are in...

The two models that stand out in this group – the Spondor SA1 and PMC DB1i have several common factors. They're the smallest, they topped the charts in the blind and hands-on listening tests and their measurements showed the smoothest and most neutral in-room frequency responses.

It should also be pointed out that the PMC and Spondor are amongst the most experienced and best established brands in our group and that it's actually a close call choosing between these two. The Spondor might have a slight advantage in sound and presentation, but it's also significantly more costly.

Although none of the other four models particularly disgraced themselves, each showed some or other weakness. The MAD My Clapton has the largest enclosure and main driver, the latter

unusual in being a co-axial device with centrally mounted tweeter. It has fine imaging and vigorous dynamics, but the overall tonality is a little dry and bright.

Monopulse's 62S is very much a 'sweet spot' speaker. It will provide very superior stereo focus for the best listening seat, but other listeners found the bottom end rather heavy.

Roksan's Kandy TR-5 is a stylish package and while the listening panel quite enjoyed its 'cheeky chappie' sonic presentation, this could largely be explained by the upper midrange peak measured in its far-field, in-room response.

Triangle's Trio is an attractively shaped standmount and while the basic balance is well-judged across the audio band, listeners noted both the limited bass and, particularly, the rather bright top end generated by its horn-loaded tweeter. ●



TRY WITH THESE...

AMPLIFIERS:
Roksan Kandy K2
£895

A superior design with ample power and a sweet, but authoritative design.

Naim NAIT XS
£1,250

A stand-out integrated amp that delivers a very communicative musical performance.

CD PLAYER:
Marantz SA8003
£830

Classically smooth, detailed and sweet sound quality.

THE WINNER IS...

STANDING HEAD and shoulders above the rest, although not in a physical sense, the winner this month is also one of the smallest speakers of its type. The Spondor SA1 is unquestionably one of the finest sub-miniatures ever. It works quite beautifully when placed close to a wall and looks superb in its high-gloss lacquer finish. It clearly demonstrates the virtue of a really well-developed and refined small speaker.



RESULTS AT A GLANCE



Make/model	My Audio Design My Clapton	Monopulse 62S	PMC DB1i	Roksan Kandy K2 TR-5	Spondor SA1 SA1	Triangle Trio
Price	£1,388	£1,195	£985	£895	£1,295	£1,449
Sound	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★
Value	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★
Build	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Practicality	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★
Conclusion	Refreshingly different package with fine muscular coherence, but overall character lacks warmth	Superior focus and coherence for the solo listener, but not without its flaws	Low coloration, good balance and fine imaging, but could be more expressive dynamically	Beautiful speaker has a sweet top end, but the overall tonal balance is uneven	Costly, but very high-quality sub-miniature with notably superior sound quality	Decent balance with lively dynamics and good warmth, but a bright and edgy top end

Key features

SIZE (WxHxD) (mm)	255x453x290	175x920x200	155x290x234	190x370x280	165x305x190	233x372x465
Driver Config	2-way	2.5-way	2-way	2-way	2-way	2-way
Main driver size(s)	1x200mm	1x165mm	1x140mm	1x130mm	1x150mm	1x160mm
Stand/floor?	Stand	Floor	Stand	Stand	Stand	Stand
Cabinet finish	Paint	Metal/fabric	Real wood veneer	Satin rosewood	High-gloss veneer	Real wood veneer
Bi-wire?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Lab conclusions E = Excellent | G = Good | A = Average | P = Poor

Sensitivity	88dB G	84dB P	85dB P	88dB G	84dB P	88.5dB G
Bass extension	36Hz A	23Hz G	40Hz A	40Hz A	30Hz G	40Hz A
Ease of Drive	+20% G	-20% A	-10% A	+10% A	-10% A	+10% A
Overall balance	+10% A	-10% A	+10% A	-20% P	+10% A	0% A
Smoothness	-10% A	-20% P	+30% E	-30% P	+30% E	0% A