

EQUIPMENT REPORT

Honoring a Great Tradition

Spendor S3/5R Mini-monitor

Paul Seydor



Philip Swift, Spendor's new owner since 2001, can't seem to stop working on the smallest speaker in his company's Classic line, the S3/5. Designed in the late nineties by Derek Hughes, son of Spendor's founder, the legendary Spencer Hughes, the S3/5 was a high-performance mini-monitor—that is, a subcompact monitor—intended to replace the then recently discontinued LS3/5a. Despite highly favorable reviews in several publications, including one from me in TAS 119, Swift introduced an SE version in 2003, while retaining the original in the line. This, too, received enthusiastic reviews; the SE offered improvements in resolution and detail, but at some sacrifice in the lovely musicality of Hughes' model. I suggested it would be nice if somehow the best qualities of both the original and the SE could be combined (TAS 143).

Well, ask and ye shall be given—sort of. Swift went back to the drawing board and with Terry Miles, one of Spendor's long-standing engineers, came up with the S3/5R, which replaces the original, soon to be discontinued when stock is depleted. The reasons, along with design details, are covered in my sidebar interview with Swift. Although identical in size and appearance, the 5R is no mere revision but a wholly new speaker, complete with new drivers, new crossover, and new materials. Yet it also remains what it always was: a two-way mini-monitor for small rooms.

Inasmuch as the S3/5 is a known and much admired commodity, the first question must be how the new model compares. Or, to be precise, contrasts. Play them side-by-side with a mono source and there's no question you're hearing two different speakers. The S3/5 sounds sweet and musical, but with a distinct, albeit mild recession from the midrange through the presence region, and a bit of lower midrange warmth. Re-reading my 1999 review, I feel I rather underplayed both these tonal characteristics, perhaps because Hughes'

voicing was so cannily, seductively musical. In the S3/5R Swift eliminates the presence trough and any hint of bogus warmth. You might almost call the old and the new a case study in yin/yang, but that is misleading. While the 5 exhibits a touch of the yin, the 5R is neither yin nor yang, but quite simply neutral. Indeed, throughout the crucial midrange, this new model may be the most neutral and natural sounding mini-monitor I know. And it's a neutrality that extends throughout the high end, except for a *frisson* around 4kHz.

As compared to the original's 90Hz, the specified -3dB point in the new speaker is 65Hz, response dropping steeply below that. As with both the original and the SE, there is no deep bass, and the lower midbass is severely reduced in level. That said, however, the S3/5R's bass is more well-defined and articulate than either of its predecessors. Nor should lovers of cello be concerned that lack of bogus warmth means the speaker will not reproduce *recorded* warmth, as Starker's Bach in SACD demonstrates [Mercury].

The S3/5R also sounds more open and coherent. The presence recession of the original has the effect of subtly emphasizing the tweeter. Again, not something you might notice by itself, but comparing the two is enough to spoil you in favor of the newer model. The first recording I played demonstrated this handily: Bach violin sonatas and partitas played by Regis Pasquier [Harmonia Mundi, vinyl only]. Pasquier's is a warm, rich, and mellow instrument with quite a lot of romantic body to the tone, which the S3/5R captures to a T. By contrast, the original loses a bit of the instrument's harmonic richness.

Go to a familiar singer like, say, Ella Fitzgerald on *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* [Classic, vinyl reissue], and the 5 fills out her lower range with an entirely pleasing roundness and warmth; the 5R loses none of this but brings the voice (more correctly) forward and allows you to hear her upper register in proper balance. The

SPECS & PRICING

Type: Sealed two-way dynamic
Driver complement: 20mm
soft dome tweeter, 140mm
polypropylene mid/bass driver
Sensitivity: 84dB/1 watt/1
meter

Frequency response: 65Hz-
20kHz +/-3dB
Impedance: 8 ohms nominal
Power handling: 25-100 watts
Dimensions: 12" x 6.5" x 7.48"
Weight: 10.1 lbs.

Finish: Cherry, rosenut, black
ash veneers
Stand height: 19-26"
Price: \$1399/pr.

QSANDD (U.S. Distributor)
216 Labonte Street, Unit G
Conway, SC 29526
(843) 349.0143
QsandD@aol.com

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Q&A with Spondor Managing Director Philip Swift on the S3/5R

Paul Seydor: Why did you redesign the speaker?

Philip Swift: Partly because we wanted to and partly because we had to. We were running out of certain materials that were no longer available, and Tymphany, that is, ScanSpeak, informed us that the tweeter was going to be discontinued. Also, as you may know, owing to the RoHS environmental legislations adopted by the European union, certain materials can no longer be used in home-entertainment products and for a while now we've felt we could improve the design.

The most evident change appears to be in the midrange/woofer?

Yes. As you know, we design and manufacture all our woofers in house. The original woofer had a dust dome [cap] in the center. Any dust dome interferes with the radiation pattern. As well, there was a lot of random radiation from the dust dome, and it results in a slightly less coherent, fuzzier sound. The new woofer has a phase-control device, a smoother response, and it responds higher in frequency with a more uniform radiation pattern; this allows us to push the crossover higher—5.5kHz, up a thousand from the original—which we think is preferable. It has also helped us to improve the phase coherence in the transition between drivers. There are also substantial internal improvements, including a new crossover that incorporates silver in the solder and gold-plating to improve the conductivity of the signal path. The damping material on the cabinet walls is now a new rubberized compound that stays more stable around room temperature. The impedance is also more uniform, so the speaker is very easy to drive. It never drops below six ohms.

The revision no longer allows for biwiring.

The original was biwirable because it used to be “audio fashion,” even for serious audiophiles, but experience has shown that in practice it almost always degrades the overall sound. We don't believe there's any real benefit, especially with respect to coherence.

What part does listening versus measurements play in Spondor design work?

Listening is the *slowest* way in the world to design something. If you understand what you're doing, how the science works, then you can get close to what you want by focusing on the measurements. Then you hone in with the listening, at which point you can put your listening time to very productive use. You make changes that, although extremely small and apparently not important in specification terms, have a very positive influence on the sound of a design. That's our philosophy.

Some designers say they use a listening panel.

My experience is that really excellent audio products are always created by one individual or a small team of like-minded designers and engineers. Listening panels tend to lead to “committee designs.” So if you *need* a listening panel to judge progress when voicing a loudspeaker, you may have a problem!



same is true of other singers from Doris Day to the Chairman of the Board himself.

Much of this review was done using vinyl sources, as the evaluation period overlapped with that of the magnificent Basis 2200/Vector record-playing system. As a check on the 5R's imaging and soundstaging, I pulled out the old Argo recording of Kings College Choir's *Procession with Carols on Advent Sunday* [Argo, vinyl only]. The album includes a diagram of the chapel showing where the choir is positioned at any given point from when they enter to when they leave and where home listeners are to imagine themselves sitting. The choir enters from the far left, pauses at several places, and doesn't move into the stalls on the right until the fifth selection. Once the singers are in the stalls, you hear them directionally from the right, yet their sound projects across the spectrum toward the center and center left. This is a very realistic recording of a large chapel with a gloriously reverberant acoustic.

The 5Rs pass this imaging/soundstaging torture test triumphantly, including a consistent rendering of layered depth across the whole stage. They even did a commendable job with the large, powerful organ, getting just about all the notes but without, of course, the room-filling expansiveness that only a larger speaker can provide. Owing to the 5R's neutrality over much of its range and the absence of any funny EQ in the upper bass, an appropriate subwoofer would be well worth investigating.

As with its predecessors, this new model must be used within its dynamic and frequency limitations, which are *very* real. A great favorite of mine is Richard Goode's *Waldstein* on Nonesuch, which I like to let rip, especially in the stunningly virtuosic last movement. The 5Rs reproduce the recording with commendable timbral accuracy but reduced in size and dynamics; any attempt to play it really loud results in audible distress. My 2600+ cubic-foot listening room is the largest space I'd use them in, and smaller would be preferable.

Which is only to repeat what I said at the outset: This remains a true *mini-monitor*. No laws of physics have been circumvented, but they have been intelligently manipulated to produce a superior example of the subcompact genre. Readers looking for small speakers to serve both high accuracy and high musicality in an intimate setting should put the S3/5R at the top of their audition list. Philip Swift here shows himself to be a discriminating steward of the great Spondor tradition. I can hardly think of higher praise for a new speaker. **TAS**

Manufacturer Comments

Spendor S3/5R

Paul Seydor is right when he says that I can't seem to stop working on our smallest loudspeaker. I guess most sound-minded people would think we'd be crazy to even contemplate replacing such well established and highly regarded designs as the Spendor S3/5 and S3/5se with a single new model. But Spendor is driven by a strong desire to create the best and most natural sounding loudspeakers and when we decided it really was time to introduce some (or should that be many) carefully considered refinements it was a challenge we couldn't resist. But it didn't stop there; our work on the new S3/5R inspired us to refine the whole Spendor Classic line. With the new SP3/1R, SP2/3R, SP1/2R, and our largest loudspeaker the SP100R, we set out to improve their beautifully balanced sound without changing it. If that sounds even crazier, it isn't, but that's another story.

Incidentally the -3dB LF point of the new 5R is 90Hz anechoic, and typically 65Hz in-room, so actually no spec change from the original S3/5. As Paul clearly describes, these numbers alone don't explain the improved way the new 5R delivers low frequencies.

Philip Swift
Managing Director
Spendor Audio Systems Ltd

Pathos Logos and Digit

Thanks to Paul Seydor and TAS. Paul previously praised the Classic One and asked for another Pathos. The Digit shares the same elegant chrome-plated steel chassis with the Classic One. Paul writes both amps sound "essentially the same," but the Logos is more musically revealing (it has two dedicated power supplies, one for the tube front end and a larger supply for the output stage). For us, this is more important than a 3dB increase in acoustic output.

Paul is a music lover with a wall of CDs. I asked if 30% were SACD. He said 10%, mostly promos. That's why Pathos makes a Red Book player that reproduces "truly lovely sound."

We did inform Paul of another English Digit review. *What Hi Fi*, February 2008: "Pathos' entry-level CD player is a great one: It's up with the very best at this price" (£1995).

Paul writes the Logos is "an amp for music listeners" and the Digit "made beautiful music that might be preferred by any number of listeners, especially those with strong allegiances to analog." Both are good values for the "Monet" without the stereo imaging limitations of a Van Gogh. Let's hope for at least one Golden Ear.

Garth Leerer
President
Musical Surroundings