Spendor's Classic 200Ti is the titanium-baffled version of the company's flagship Classic 200, taking their standard price of $34,999 up to $38,999. While they hark back to the BBC template from which Spendor was born, and still deliver music with the captivating warmth and charm of the 1970s originals, the latest models are built around the newest generation of Spendor technology — advanced polymer and Kevlar cones, refined crossover networks, enhanced cabinet structures, new elastomer panel damping and new style magnetic grilles.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SPENDOR LOUDSPEAKERS

Interview feature Jez Ford

"These days there are few things outside of performance cars and hi-fi, and maybe wine, watches and art, where you have to take a hands-on 'test-drive' before you can make an informed buying or upgrade investment decision," notes Philip Swift, CEO of the UK's Spendor Audio Systems Ltd. "Good retailers, and the 'driving experience', not internet sales, continue to be an important link in the supply chain. As a specialist manufacturer with the focus always on performance I don't think the fundamentals which Spendor applied 50 years ago are very different to those that underpin everything we do today. What has changed is the availability of new and superb materials, manufacturing techniques, software and instrumentation, alongside the easy availability of a vast library of music of all genres in wonderfully musical-sounding — though OK, not every recording is perfect — high-res formats."

Philip Swift is clearly a businessman as well as an audio enthusiast. Previously the co-founder of Audiolab, he took over Spendor at the beginning of 2000, and the company has since increased its turnover tenfold. And it still manufactures all three of its product ranges in the UK.

"Yes, we design and manufacture all Spendor drivers and cabinets in-house in the UK. This gives us complete control over the quality of our products and manufacturing processes. It would be difficult to continue using some of the special proprietary materials and techniques — the hand-finishing methods and special calibration and testing we have developed for our drivers, cabinets, crossovers and complete loudspeakers — if they were made in Asia or outside the UK.

"Besides, our end-customers, dealers and distributors in Asia have always liked that our products are totally made in the UK. We wouldn't want to lose that advantage, it's an inherent element of our personality and individuality."

Indi Imports, which recently took over Spendor's distribution in Australia, clearly agrees.

"The Indi Group made a decision to sell only brands which have a true heritage and history in the audio industry," says Indi Imports' MD Paul Riachi. "That's one reason why we took the opportunity with Spendor. And also, of course, because their build and sound quality is, I believe, the very best coming out of the UK."

THE A-TO-D OF SPENDOR

Spendor's current collection of loudspeakers is divided into three ranges — the A-Line, the D-Line, and the Classics. The divisions are more about sound character and style than technology or performance, says Swift.

"A few years back we asked ourselves, 'How do we communicate who we are and what we do on a consistent global basis to our increasingly diverse but ever more discerning and aware — via the internet — target audience'. We identified three groups, which internally we refer to as making up our 'Music Lover's Universe' — our audience, in other words. We identified Music Lovers, Entertainment Seekers and Enlightened Consumers. There are no black-and-white divisions between the groups, and some will migrate between them as experience and aspirations develop. So for example, while people in each group may have a turntable, their reasons for purchasing the turntable vary between 'novelty', 'intrigue', 'fun', and 'nothing will ever sound as good as vinyl!'

△ THE ORIGINAL SPENDOR BC1, WHICH WAS SELECTED BY THE BBC AS A BROADCAST REFERENCE MONITOR LOUDSPEAKER

> While engineering provides the tools we need to realise our ideas, our ears will continue to guide our decisions on what sounds right

And that exercise helped us to understand how to describe each of our three product lines and who they will most likely appeal to."

So he describes the A-Line as aimed at customers who want high performance, neat modern styling, and loudspeakers that will give good results with a wide variety of equipment and rooms, including less expensive equipment. They are "bringing music to life", he says, "refined and composed with real subtlety, but also with a snap and drive that makes them captivating to listen to at all times."

The D-Line, then, is aimed at customers who want modern loudspeakers that deliver uncompromised sound quality in any listening environment, able to reveal the advantages of the finest high-end equipment and recordings.

"They reveal every detail," says Swift. "No distortion, no ambiguity, no blurring of the music's shades, tones and colours: all is exact and faithful to the original recording, while highlighting subtleties you may never have noticed before."

Then there's the Classic line, with designs that hark back to the earlier days of Spendor in their looks, but which nevertheless incorporate all Spendor's latest technologies and research, rising to their peak with the $38,999 Classic 200Ti.

"There's an obvious appeal to traditional hi-fi enthusiasts," notes Swift. "But the Classic loudspeakers are also finding a new following amongst those who simply want something a little different from the world of chrome and tech. Even if you don't have the space or the budget, no-one can fail to be impressed with the sheer scale and music-making abilities of the Classic 200. And our new Classic 100Ti and Classic 200Ti feature titanium baffles that bring a dramatic modern look to our original Classic style."

INNOVATIVE ADVANCES

"So we focus a lot of attention on the shape, size, form, dimensions and finish of each of our models to ensure they will fit elegantly into any listening environment," says Swift. "But we focus even more attention on making better and more innovative products, at reasonable and accessible prices."

He highlights some of the company's most recent innovations. In cabinet design there is the Spendor 5th-generation linear flow port technology which was inspired, he says, "by the advanced aerodynamics we saw being applied to great effect in Formula 1". The new port is featured in the Spendor D-Line D7.2 and D9.2 speakers.

Dynamic damping is used inside the cabinets of both A-Line and D-Line speakers. This, says Swift, "ensures a clear naturally dynamic sound free from cabinet coloration — it avoids high mass and heavy damping which store energy and then, as it is slowly released, slow and blur the sound you hear."

Swift points also to Spendor's LPZ tweeter and EP77 engineering-polymer mid/bass cones.

"The LPZ wasn't a trial-and-error development," he says. "Instead we sought to understand exactly what happens to sound waves once they leave a tweeter diaphragm. The goal of every tweeter designer is to achieve linear acoustic output over a wide frequency range, but in practice this is extremely difficult. Our approach is radical, and it works. The tweeter is built around a stainless-steel front plate which forms a damped acoustic chamber in front of a lightweight woven polyamide diaphragm. The front plate incorporates a phase-correcting micro foil to equalise soundwave path lengths across the diaphragm surface, while it also generates a symmetrical pressure environment on both faces of the tweeter diaphragm. So the tweeter operates in a balanced linear mode."

The EP77 engineering-polymer cones are rigid and light, "and avoid the break-up and energy storage modes that blur and harden the sound of most conventional loudspeakers," he says.

For dedicated bass drivers, Spendor uses a Kevlar composite material, with its desirable combination of lightness and high rigidity.

IN THE BEGINNING

It was innovation in cone materials which originally put Spendor on the map at the end of the 1960s. Bextrene was the material of choice for the speaker cones in Spendor's first pair of speakers, the BC1, with Spendor's 8-inch bass-mid driver staking a claim as the world's first commercial-production 8-inch plastic cone driver. A product of BBC engineer Spencer Hughes (co-founder with Dorothy Hughes, hence the name of Spen-Dor) and co-designer Dudley Harwood, the BC1 speakers had a three-way design: the 8-inch Bextrene mid/bass driver, a Celestion HF 1300 tweeter ranging between 3kHz and 13kHz, and a Coles 4001 G supertweeter above 13kHz.

Philip Swift was a Spendor fan from the first (see following interview) and has an interesting take on that supertweeter.

"Contrary to what many enthusiasts and historians like to believe, the Coles supertweeter was added so that with three drivers the BC1 could be classified as a professional product and thus avoid the significant additional purchase tax that was levied on non-professional loudspeakers. Alan Sugar was even more innovative in his approach to this purchase tax issue, moulding a three-way front for his Amstrad loudspeaker but only including two working drivers!

"So while adding a second tweeter was never a preferred option — wavelength constraints make it near-impossible to integrate two small tweeters — on a practical level the BBC did find that the slightly extended ultra-high-frequency response made it easier to identify 19kHz stereo pilot tone breakthrough, a big problem in many FM tuners, and TV line-breakthrough noise. Remember that the BBC and others selected the BC1 as a broadcast reference monitor loudspeaker — not merely for listening to music and voice, but to ensure the highest level of technical quality and consistency for all programmes and broadcasts."

Swift also offers a historical clarification on Hughes' use of bextrene.

"Bextrene on its own is an awful material for a loudspeaker cone!" he notes. "It is light and fairly rigid but it vibrates and generates nasty-sounding resonances and break-up modes. Spendor's secret was the application of viscoelastic damping and understanding that the loudspeaker cone, damping, surround, suspension and adhesives must be considered as a whole working system. So important elements of the BC1 — and the BC2, BC3 and original SA1 — included thin-walled viscoelastic damped cabinet panels to push any cabinet colouration down in frequency away from the critical mid-band, lifting the cabinet to a good listening height with an original low-mass open-frame stand design, and careful tuning and damping of the reflex ports to ensure optimally flat LF response and correct Q. Also crucial was their understanding of the influence of cone profiles, the application of three-port inductor auto-transformers wound on high-saturation radio-metal cores for accurate level matching, and a highly refined and calibrated multi-element crossover network to achieve an even flat frequency response with good phase characteristics. Finally they knew how to make loudspeakers that were closely and consistently pair-matched to a BBC-approved reference standard."

Some 600 pairs of BC1s are said to have ended up in operation at the BBC — and this author should perhaps declare that he grew up with two pairs of ex-BBC Spendor BC1s in his home, and still has one of those pairs in full working order, though sadly not with the original stands, which Philip Swift notes may have seen Spendor responsible, if inadvertently, for inventing the loudspeaker stand as we know it today. One more among the many innovations which continue to keep the brand ahead.

REVIEW

SPENDOR A7

The big brothers of the A-Line, the Spendor A7s are elegant in their simplicity. They are two-way speakers, each with a wide-surround 22mm tweeter and one of the company's latest 18cm EP77 Polymer cones for mid/bass. They're 93cm high, but relatively slim and compact for a floorstander, so will fit neatly into most homes. But don't push them up against a wall: their rear-firing slot-shaped reflex ports not only reduce noise and distortion, they give better grip on bass. Four spikes screw into the metal discs on each plinth to provide better contact and aid the cabinet's rigidity.

SPECIFICATIONS

Spendor A7

Price: $6,875
Design: 2-way
Frequency response: 32Hz–25kHz
Sensitivity: 88dB/W/m
Impedance: 8 ohms
Dimensions (HWD): 934×180×305mm
Weight: 18kg (each)
Contact: www.indimports.com

And with Spendor having its own cabinet-making plant in the UK, it delivers a high quality build with crisp edges and impeccably smart wood-veneer finishes in oak, black oak, walnut (above) or (previous page) in satin white, which here doesn't incur the price supplement applied in their home market.

Toe them in slightly towards the listening position to get the best of their stereo imaging and solid focus for vocals, because their detail levels proved fantastic, timing with pinpoint accuracy and transparency.

Their sound was clean and organised; where other Spendors have prioritised refinement, these A7s also pack in plenty of punch to keep things sounding lively. They also went satisfyingly deep, keeping a firm grip on the bass line of Massive Attack's *Angel*, for example. Each note was pulled taut, the edges precise, the performance agile and controlled. Across all genres these articulate Spendors remain endlessly listenable even when things get intense. These are refined yet entertaining speakers combining precision and subtlety with enjoyable dynamics and rhythm.

REVIEW

SPENDOR D7.2

Recently replacing the original D7, the new D7.2 speakers don't mess with the basic form factor, but deliver changes under the skin. They remain a two-and-a-half-way design, with a Kevlar composite bass unit augmenting the output of the centrally-mounted EP77 polymer-coned mid/bass. The tweeter is the LPZ (Linear Pressure Zone) design explained by Philip Swift in our main article, built around the eye-catching circular stainless steel front plate which forms a damped acoustic chamber in front of the woven polyamide diaphragm.

What's changed inside the slender 95cm-high cabinet is revised and now has asymmetric bracing, together with a refinement of the small low-mass constrained polymer dampers between the bracing and cabinet panels, and the noted lack of acoustic filling traditionally used to absorb drivers' rearward output. The new structure is claimed to be far more rigid, providing a better foundation from which the drive units can work to advantage in low-frequency precision and agility. The speaker's bass output is tuned by the latest generation of Spendor's linear flow port.

It's another beautiful box, too, with five options for the finish, adding cherry to the list of veneers for the A7 (left).

The D7.2s proved highly-transparent performers, fairly ruthless in revealing the sonic traits of the partnering system, so if your system electronics are bright or edgy you'll know about it. They also took a few days to come on song, mellowing out over time, but never to the point of becoming overly easy-going. They sounded taut, agile and highly responsive — they can kick hard when required, and the 90dB/W/m sensitivity means that they don't need excessive levels of power to do so. And again they remained composed under pressure, staying organised and rhythmically coherent even at higher levels.

There's plenty of finesse too, vocals natural and expressive, while the D7.2s rendered an expansive and nicely layered soundstage overall, populated by precisely-focused instruments.

Considering their comparatively modest dimensions, the sonic authority on offer here is impressive. If you want to analyse the recording you can, but these speakers will also let you simply sit back and enjoy the music.

SPECIFICATIONS

Spendor D7.2

Price: $9,499
Design: 2.5-way
Frequency response: 29Hz–25kHz
Sensitivity: 90dB/W/m
Impedance: 8 ohms
Dimensions (HWD): 980×190×330mm
Weight: 21kg (each)
Contact: www.indimports.com

△ PHILIP SWIFT ENCOUNTERED SPENCER HUGHES BEFORE SPENDOR THE COMPANY WAS EVEN FORMED. THIRTY YEARS LATER, AFTER HIS TIME WITH AUDIOLAB, HE BOUGHT THE COMPANY

INTERVIEW

Philip Swift has been the owner of Spendor since January 2000, and was previously co-founder of Audiolab. "I'm always thinking about the future," he says, "that's where my interest and focus has always been". But here Jez Ford persuades him to delve into the key moments of his hi-fi past.

Audio Esoterica: *Spendor recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, and I gather you were aware of the company's speakers from near the beginning. Where did you first encounter them, and why did you warm to them?*
Philip Swift: I was a student at Imperial College and found myself working part-time at the original 'Audio T' shop in London's Oxford Street. That's where I first heard a very early version of the BC1. It sounded amazing — so real, so clear, with a stable stereo image and surprisingly articulate bass for the time. It wasn't cheap, about twice the price of a pair of KEF Concertos or B&W DM3s, and relative to those and other popular speakers of the day the BC1s were slim, compact and standmounted. I had to work a lot of hours to afford my first pair of BC1s. A few years later I had Spendor BC3s — serial numbers one and two!

And Audio T is where I met Spen [Spencer Hughes] before Spendor was incorporated as a limited company in 1971. We sold many Spendor loudspeakers and I got to know Spen and his 'family' team well, and he was happy to explain all the design and engineering that made Spendor loudspeakers so special. So I guess I've always been a fan of not just Spendor loudspeakers but also the company and its elegant intelligent approach to engineering and manufacturing.

AE: *But before Spendor you had an illustrious career with the original Audiolab. How did you get into music and then hi-fi, and then into the industry?*
PS: Even as a child I had been fascinated by sound and music. I made various amplifiers from scratch while at school, and built several loudspeakers. Then at the hi-fi shop when I went to University we had amplifier test equipment which was better than most manufacturers had, and a proper demonstration room with a custom remote-controlled comparator. At the time most dealers simply sold sealed boxes with no demonstration — and no technical support or after-sales service. We did things very differently: we offered home demonstrations and part exchanges, and we got involved in some quite complex installation projects. So we got noticed, and I got to meet and visit designers and engineers from just about every important hi-fi manufacturer and importer. We caught the attention of the hi-fi press and several professional sound engineers, while many equipment designers and several like-minded dealers would regularly drop by for an update and a listen, to show us their new products and sometimes to see how they measured. It was a fascinating time.

I also spent a summer in the R&D department of Bang & Olufsen in Denmark, and saw how serious hi-fi manufacturing was a complex and challenging business. So when I left University I knew there was only one thing I wanted to do.

I'd met Derek Scotland [the co-founder of Audiolab] at University and we decided to design our own products, which subsequently became Lentek products when we moved to Cambridge to join the company as MD [Swift] and Technical Director [Scotland]. Our Lentek products enjoyed good success, and we were also the first distributors outside of the US for Mobile Fidelity, Sheffield and Telarc. But once we decided we were sure — and others were *not* so sure! — that our concept for a new range of affordable high-performance hi-fi electronics was viable, we quit our day jobs to focus totally on developing the Audiolab 8000A, 8000C and 8000P. That was done in a bedroom in my house. The original 8000A was launched in October 1983, and we never looked back.

AE: *How long did you remain at Audiolab after the arrival of Udo Zucker and the conversion to Tag McLaren Audio in 1998? Was there an interim before taking on Spendor?*
PS: I remember well... it was one year and one week — three months of that on gardening leave. Zucker didn't want any input from me; I wish I could have left sooner! It was two years later that I acquired Spendor.

AE: *Where did Spendor stand when you arrived? How did you come to join?*
PS: UK company Soundtracs had acquired the business around 1993 when Dorothy Hughes [MD and wife of the late Spencer Hughes] decided it was time to retire. Derek Hughes [Spendor chief engineer, son of Spencer and Dorothy] enjoyed his engineering role, but didn't want to take on running a business day to day. Spendor was still doing steady business — sales weren't growing and the brand had lost some of its visibility, but its international reputation was intact. Then in 1999 an industry friend in Taiwan mentioned that Spendor was for sale, and was I interested? I was well advanced with developing my own home automation business including high-end audio, and had got involved in some exciting projects with others. But I had to do it. I knew if I didn't buy Spendor it would be sold to a Chinese company and re-located to China. This was a never-to-be-repeated opportunity to acquire one of the UK's most highly respected loudspeaker brands, and I saw there was great potential to transform Spendor into a progressive modern business and put the name firmly back on the map.

A few minutes later Todd Wells, the MD of Soundtracs, was on the phone to me! I acquired the business at the beginning of January 2000.

AE: *Where did you take the company from there? And who were you working with?*
PS: So initially Spendor loudspeakers were designed and engineered by Spencer Hughes. After Spencer passed away in 1983 Derek Hughes took over. When I acquired Spendor in 2000 Derek continued as consulting engineer until 2003, when he decided to semi-retire and pursue other projects. Graham Landick, ex-B&W and Tag McLaren Audio, joined as Head of Loudspeaker Design and Engineering — and that was when we started to introduce the major changes and innovations which were realised in our multi-award-winning S-Series loudspeakers. Since I acquired the business I think we've transformed, streamlined and thoroughly modernised almost everything. Alongside our all-new D-Line and A-Line we've carefully — sensitively, successfully — introduced the most significant-ever advances to the Spendor Classic Line without losing any of the heart and soul of the 70s' originals. Today our turnover is about 10 times what it was back in 2000, so we must be doing something right.

Terry Miles, who had over 30 years experience working for Spendor as chief technician became Technical Design Manager in 2007. In 2010 we moved to our own brand-new custom-fitted premises in Hailsham in East Sussex, and we now have our own specialist cabinet manufacturing facility (Timberworx) alongside our new Spendor R&D facility at the Advanced Manufacturing Park in Sheffield where I am now heading up our new team which will include a number of fresh graduate engineers with the vision and skills to implement the most modern measuring techniques and simulation software. I believe this is the only way forward because it opens exciting possibilities for significant sound quality advances. Already we've come up with some exciting new ideas for future products, but they will take time to develop and prove.

"OUR NEW CLASSIC 100Ti AND CLASSIC 200Ti FEATURE TITANIUM BAFFLES THAT BRING A DRAMATIC MODERN LOOK TO OUR ORIGINAL CLASSIC STYLE."

Our new design team has some of the sharpest ears I've ever encountered, and everyone has a real passion for music and sound. While engineering provides the tools we need to realise our ideas, our ears will continue to guide our decisions on what sounds right.

AE: *Is there anything exciting in the pipeline you can share?*
PS: I can reveal that later this year, when hopefully some sort of new normality resumes in the world, we will be launching BASE, a new division of Spendor specialising in Vibration Control Technology. Our first products have been three years in development, and they incorporate unique, elegant, and highly effective patented technology. They offer a solution which eliminates the all-pervading vibration which adversely affects the sound of all hi-fi and audio components, from streamers to amps, turntables, power supplies, whether digital, analogue or tube, and regardless of cost. The effect of adding a BASE Platform is instant, dramatic and clearly audible. We'll update you when we are ready to launch!

For Spendor in Australia, visit: www.indimports.com

"We quit our day jobs to focus totally on developing the 8000A, 8000C and 8000P. That was done in a bedroom in my house..."