

## THIEL 2.3 LOUDSPEAKER: RETURN OF THE DECIMAL POINT

IF THE KEY TO A LIFE WELL LIVED IS, AS THE Japanese would have it, *balance*, so must it also be the key to a successful mid-sized, mid-priced speaker design. Jim Thiel's new 2.3 speaker thrills and excites, its wows and wonders prolific and surprising. But all the more surprising is its balance, its measured approach, its designer's obvious humility in letting his creations speak for themselves. This speaker, after all, "took 20 years to create," proclaim the marketing minions. Lord, that's more time than Pat Nixon spent on her hair for the 1968 campaign.

By now, almost every audiophile knows that the 2.3's predecessor, the 2.2, had its decimal point excised by Bose, who copyrighted the figure "2.2" (copyrighted a number!). Well, Thiel's decimal point is back, and it ain't the only change, children. The 2.3 uses completely new drivers top to bottom, all of which are anodized and extremely lightweight aluminum, in addition to a more traditional passive radiator, for which Thiel claims the advantages of a port while "eliminat[ing] bass port resonances and noise." The new speaker, finished in Thiel's usual furniture-grade veneers (all faces save the bottom), is neither compact nor particularly heavy; non-audiophile visitors to our medium-sized living room inevitably remarked on their size, as in "My, those are big speakers." (The audiophile world waits in vain for the population at large to catch up to our humble standards.)

While wild popularity – by High End terms – has always accompanied the rear-canted speaker designs of Jim Thiel, the naysayers declaim smugly, they're too – analytical. The term resonates with authority, but what on earth does it mean? I suspect it refers to Thiel's reputation for bright high frequencies, a problem that occurred long ago with the introduction of CDs and solved by subsequent designs over ten years ago. These speakers do not have abnormally bright highs, though they certainly never add syrup to the 'cakes.

Analysis is hardly the issue here, though. Do the speakers allow music through, do they represent the real thing, do they make for satisfying listening? Wait not for the conclusion: unless your habitation boasts a very, very large room, you will likely find the 2.3 all the speaker you ever need, one you must spend many, many more shekels to surpass. I resist the urge to name names, but I have recently heard transducers selling for three and then nearly eight times what these excellent specimens command, and I for one would save the money.

### A LITTLE MIDRANGE SPREAD

One discovers at the outset an uncanny midrange reproduction, all the more so as it meets the treble with nary a seam. Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby* [Analogue Productions LP APJ 009] may as well be a lesson in drum reproduction. "My Foolish Heart," the opener, shows Motian's kit round and sharp, skin and wood. On the title cut, the Thiels illuminate cymbals above drums, the former's subtle dynamic shifts tracked without sweat. The same cut's bass solo indicates the near-invisible integration between woofer and mid, speed ever so slightly superior in the latter. Such balance is also demonstrated deftly in the weight of Evans' piano: exactly right.

Willie Nelson's *Stardust* [CBS 35305] through the Thiels demonstrates a state-of-the-art reproduction of male vocal, highlighted by a lifelike leading edge. The scrim of reproduction over Nelson's voice is paper-thin and translucent. A phenomenon, as few other speakers at any price allow a listener to "see" through the scrim so easily. No electronic component eliminates the scrim completely (there is, after all, no fully transparent microphone), but few and far between are those components that reveal musicians so precisely, the flimsiest and most subtle gauzy curtain notwithstanding. The verity of male vocal reproduction is confirmed on Uncle Tupelo's excellent *March 16-20, 1992* [Rockville 6090-2], where Jay



Farrar's voice positively haunts on the traditional "Moonshiner."

It may be the case that Thiel's coaxial mid-tweeter is the discriminant. Unlike most coaxially-mounted drivers, Thiel's are more than concentric. The mid/tweeter driver is driven by a single magnet and voice coil at the center of the tweeter. At midrange frequencies, the tweeter couples rigidly to the midrange, while at higher frequencies the tweeter effectively decouples and operates alone. Thus, the combination mid/tweeter driver operates as a true point source, covering a broad frequency band without crossover.

On Ella's *Clap Hands Here Comes Charlie* [Verve V6-4053], the drums of the title cut resonate with the articulated microdynamics of the real thing; the fade of the guitar notes on Willie Nelson's "Blue Skies" (*Stardust*) also demonstrates a natural diminution of volume – demonstrating again one of analogue's superiorities over digital. I think HP's comment in Issue 113 about this speaker's "spooky ... translucency" relates not only to its clarity but its clarity abetted by its

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uncanny dynamic constructions.

Within its range, the dynamics of the bass nearly — nearly — match those of the higher frequencies. On Blue Rodeo's *Five Days in July* [Warner Canadian 93846], the Thiel draws a visceral mid-bass line in the sand which mini-speakers dare not cross. Similarly, Monty Budwig's bass on *Shelly Manne and His Men at the Blackhawk, Volume 2* [Contemporary S7578] is stupendously articulate in "What's New," with near-real microdynamic control. Joe Gordon's trumpet enters with alarm, all bite, brass, and bold. (Listening, I was moved to note, "Is this what seems 'analytical'? Fuck that, this swings!") Take, too, Respighi's *The Birds* [Mercury SR90153]: not only does the Thiels' bass reproduction not detract from the dynamics of the first movement, but the roll-off below the penultimate octave is so subtly effected you might not even notice it.

Might not. Recordings with truly wide-band response can frustrate a speaker of relatively modest dimensions. There are times when the low bass constricts slightly in its attack at *ppp* and beyond (try Saturn from Mehta's *Planets*, London CS6734), but this may be because the 2.3's reach exceeds its grasp slightly in the bottom registers.

### L'IMAGE, C'EST MOI

A hallmark of Thiel designs is a commanding sense of both instrumental image and soundspace, and the 2.3 is no exception — once it's set up properly. Thiel's excellent owner's manual suggests, correctly, that the best image results from the speakers' pointing "straight ahead rather than toward the listener." The manual also suggests placement at least two feet, preferably three, from the rear wall and five feet from the sides. This last proved unworkable in my room, and I suspect that the slightly constricted lower octaves would be a beneficiary in addition to the width of image. But more on this anon.

The 2.3 is capable of reproducing superior depth, but it *must* be sufficiently far from the rear wall to do this. In my placement experiments (I disagree with the manual that the speaker is non-critical of placement), Mary Lou Lord's pipsqueak voice — on her excellent *Got No Shadow* [Work/Sony OK

67574] — never achieved its best dimensionality until the speakers were about four feet from the rear wall. Another potential casualty of carelessness, the bass response is very sensitive to placement, and in small and mid-sized rooms, can easily overwhelm if positioning is not attended carefully.

But when the placement is right — ooh, baby. Mercury's Respighi reveals layer upon layer of depth. The second-movement "doves" inspired looks of curiosity from my cat; chirps emerged from well ahead of the strings, while the harp sang its own tune much farther afield. The orchestral image occupied several feet to the outside of each speaker; the close-yer-eyes-and-point test led me to visualize instruments in the hallway or side yard, both of which are demarcated by walls.

Subtlety reigns; Blue Rodeo exhibits proper vocal separation between two vocalists on "Five Days in May." On "Hasn't Hit Me Yet," three vocalists are off-center left, off-center right, and far right, a division clouded by less articulate components, and one the Thiels reveal effortlessly. Smaller ensembles also materialize as Ella did on "Clap Hands"; Uncle Tupelo's Jay Farrar and his acoustic guitar achieve a solid and superbly delineated presence on "Coalminers," from their *March 16-20, 1992*.

You want depth and image? Check out "What's New" on the Shelly Manne album. Mid-tune, the house phone rings dead center, about 50 feet behind my back wall. Many speakers lay claim to proper portrayal of non-musical ephemera like this — all the easier for its surprise — but this also bears the picking of a nit: in my listening room, there is a slight tendency to a horseshoe-shaped soundstage, with apparent depth increased in the middle, rear corners truncated. Less noticeable on orchestral recordings (can you guess why?), it never rose to the level of annoyance, but there it is.

An additional caveat must be offered, though this is in Thiel's favor. Thiel's literature and owner's manual suggest amplifiers from 100 to 400 (!) watts per side, though I powered the speakers to indefensible levels with about 110. In all but very large rooms, I suspect these speakers could easily be dri-

ven to acceptable levels with about 50 watts, though this may, of course, exacerbate the slight macrodynamic constriction I found in my room.

### WHAT'LL IT TAKE TO GET YOU IN ONE TODAY?

I have no extensive experience with the 2.2, so I cannot say how much an advance the 2.3 represents. I can say that the 2.3 is an outstanding speaker, fairly priced, and possessed of few faults of commission. It breaks new ground at its price in its reproduction of the midrange through the lower treble (at least for moving-coil speakers), and it never fails to serve the music. There will be those, I am sure, who insist that one speaker or another is superior in one aspect or another of reproduction, and I have not heard the Magnepan 3.5. Still, I doubt seriously there is a speaker at anything near its price that is a *better* bet.

At the middle of the price structure (leaving out, for I am a man of common sense, those speakers above \$10,000 per pair), a capable loudspeaker involves a series of judicious compromises. In my experience, speakers that excel in one attribute frequently become idiosyncratic, and more so the less (money, cabinet volume, material) a designer has to work with. That said, the Thiel 2.3 is the Honda Accord of speakers, remarkable for that glorious mid-tweeter combo and the other things it does right, but even more remarkable for how little it does wrong, and its reliability in service of music. If you can spring \$3,300 for speakers, or even well above that, do not miss it.

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