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Exploring Frontiers of Sound™

WELL WORTH the WAIT

The Thiel CS1.5 Loudspeaker



By Rufus Smith and Tom Müller

Although best known for their state-of-the-art CS5i and CS7 models, Thiel boasts a full product line. As they introduce each new model, they incorporate their latest design thoughts and technologies. For that reason, the less expensive but more recent models can truly bedevil their pricier older siblings. In the Thiel lineage, the most recent designs are the flagship CS7 and the affordable CS1.5 and CS.5. The CS1.5 is an “update” of the venerable CS1.2. “Update, my

as...er, foot!” The CS1.5 is a fresh new design with all new cabinetry and components. Don’t call it an update.

Call it a new Icon.

The \$1,990 CS1.5 is a two-way system that features a one inch metal dome tweeter and a 6.5 inch metal woofer. Bass response is augmented through the use of a passive radiator. The speakers are 8.5 inches wide, 11 inches deep, and 33 inches tall. They weigh in at a modest 42 pounds per speaker. Remarkably, the more expensive CS1.5 is actually smaller than its predecessor.

The hallmarks of any Thiel speaker are resolution, harmonic accuracy, pinpoint imaging, and attention to detail. These characteristics were found in the CS1.2. There, lack of bass extension was the major weakness. Would the *smaller* CS1.5 be able to address this limitation while retaining the CS1.2’s strengths? Absolutely! It is better in every way, including bass extension.

The first thing you hear is the CS1.5’s midrange purity. This is a speaker with world class resolution and focus. The ultimate test of any speaker’s midrange is the human voice. With the CS1.5’s, voices are reproduced with a spooky realism that conveys the emotion of the song with the directness of a linebacker blitz. On Carol Kidd’s rendition of “Gloomy Sunday” from *The night we called it a day...* (Linn Records, AKH 007), the pain and despair of losing a lover blindsides the listener right in the heart. Solomon Burke’s soulful

version of Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” from the album of the same name (Rounder Europa, REU 1004) instills an unshakable sense of hope in a world torn asunder by war, crime, and drugs.

The CS1.5 faithfully reproduces instrumental timbres. On Jorge Strunz and Ardeshir Farah’s recording, *Misterio* (Walter Lilly Acoustics, WLA-CS-08), all of the components that make up a guitar note are accurately reproduced. You are hit with the initial high energy attack of the note, followed by the rapid decay down to the rich harmonics that give an acoustic nylon string its character. This is a special virtue of the CS1.5—across its frequency response it reproduces dynamic changes consistently. Thus, the ebb and flow, attack and decay, of each note is presented, intact.

Bass performance is excellent within the limitations of the design. Properly placed in a reasonably supportive room, the CS1.5 will produce seamless bass down to roughly 45 Hz before the onset of roll-off. The theme from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera* (Polydar 831 273-2 Y-2) features a pipe organ in all its glory. When faced with this challenge, the CS1.5 just shrugged and said “no big deal.” Of course the very bottom notes were a little weak, but this lack of extension was not at all musically distracting.

The CS1.5 sculpts a realistic portrait of the recording venue. The only weakness here is some compression of the stage height. Images focus in a plane near the top of the speakers. On *The Weavers’ Reunion at Carnegie Hall-1963* (Analogue Produc-

tions APP 005), the CS1.5 projects the width and depth of Carnegie Hall, but the height of the recording venue is reduced to a level that appears to float just above the speakers. This, we should add, is a characteristic of another great speaker, the Wilson Audio WATT. If you want a tall soundstage, buy a tall speaker. Within the soundstage, images are tightly focused and precisely located, regardless of the dynamic conditions. On "Selections from Mary Poppins" from *Center Stage* (Wilson Audiophile W-8824), the locations of instruments played by the National Symphonic Winds within the soundstage are unambiguous.

Clearly, the CS1.5 does the audiophile thing in spades. More impressively,

though, is that it swings like Tarzan. Its top to bottom coherence gets it out of the way and lets the music flow. This speaker can rock and it doesn't mind being driven hard. Molly Hatchet's title cut from *Flirtin' With Disaster* (Epic JE36110) exemplifies southern rock at its best: a driving beat and sense of urgency. The Thiel will make you get up and dance.

Thiel may have the long view in sight, but they had better be ready for the boatload of CS1.5 orders that are going to land in the here and now. For us music lovers. . . well, it was worth the wait.

Ed. Note: The Thiel CS1.5 was originally intended as a Foundation article and, it was based on this intention that Rufus Smith

conducted the audition and wrote the review. After several lengthy listening sessions, it became apparent that the CS1.5 is more than just a great little speaker, it is a great speaker that is little. In short, it is an Icon. My needs, as a reviewer, require a tad more bass extension than the CS1.5 can deliver, but I must say that rarely has a speaker so thoroughly wooed me. This speaker would be on my short list for that desert island retreat. For what it is, it is nearly perfect. Perfectly balanced, perfectly behaved, perfectly voiced. With the exception of the bass extension, the CS 1.5 could be used by any reviewer to review any product at any price. Its resolution is that high. It is one of the world's best loudspeakers. I don't give a fig what it costs — it's one of the best.

From *The Audio Adventure*, January 1996, Volume 3, Issue 1

TOP TEN *Finds*

The Audio Adventure *Selects Its Faves For The Past Year*, by Tom Müller

The *Audio Adventure* is, most of all, about finding the great affordable products of home entertainment. The diamonds in the sand. Since our debut in October 1994, we have encountered many spectacular products, the great majority of which are affordable by high end standards. How then could I resist this opportunity to look back across the *Adventure's* first year plus and hold up to the light the true gems we found? Thus we have the *Adventure's* first annual Top Ten Finds.

If there is a surprise in selecting ten "finds," it is that there were so many more finds that had to be left out. Affordable audio is a rich vein that runs wider and deeper than anybody realized. While I am no longer surprised by the high caliber of sound available at reasonable prices, I am constantly delighted. I look forward to each new box with the excitement of a kid at Christmas. But as we embrace the new year, let's not forget the following ten friends. [see *The Audio Adventure*, Volume number 3, issue number 1, for the

complete text of the descriptions of the following components.—THIEL]

Number Ten: Audio-Technica AT ML-150 Phono Cartridge (\$359)

Number Nine: Music Interface Technologies T3 Wires

Number Eight: Bedini Ultra-Clarifier (\$125)

Number Seven: Alón Petite Loudspeaker (\$995)

Number Six: Music Hall CD32 CD Player (\$300)

Number Five: AMC CVT3030a Integrated Amplifier (\$995)

Number Four: Sonograph SA 250 Power Amplifier (\$995)

Number Three: NEAR 10M Loudspeaker (\$430)

Number Two: Rotel RA-970BX Integrated Amplifier (\$480)

Number One: THIEL CS1.5 Loudspeaker (\$1,990)

I couldn't help it, honest! I didn't want to list any products over \$1000 in this feature, but the CS1.5 will not be denied. At almost \$2,000, it's hard to call this a find—until you hear it in a system that lets it strut. This THIEL has the resolution to contend at any price (yes, it is that good, and I've heard enough of the big boys to know what I am talking about). Imagine a state-of-the-art speaker and just put a limit on its peak loudness levels and lower bass extension. The mega-buck speakers move more air, but that's about all that's missing. That's the CS1.5, our top find in 1995.

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