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*This Southern Belle, a
Kentucky thoroughbred,
is so-o polite...
so-o well built...*

by KEN KESSLER

THIEL CS3.6

Lord knows, the sound is about as seductive as it gets, a real Southern Belle without the ringing. This speaker is as smooth as a Shot of Jim Beam Black Label, and as easy to enjoy



Big boxes: doncha just love 'em? Admittedly, I'm a two-genre man—gigantic panels or minuscule boxes are my speakers of choice—but I do get a buzz out of coffin-sized wooden enclosures and hefty cone woofers and the sheer slam they can produce. And Thiel makes some of the most consistent, most musical and (okay, I know this is a hi-fi nut virtue) impressive boxes of all. The latest model, the CS3.6, is currently one from the top; it's an absolute honey and it embodies all of the latest developments from the fertile mind of Jim Thiel. This includes the nifty double-cone driver technology which I wish they'd call 'Twin-Skin'—but then Thiel comes from Kentucky and people Down South are leery of monikers which suggest even traces of salacity.

This is, after all, the heart of the '3.6 and not just because it's novel and the subject of a patent application: the 'double cone' diaphragm is employed in the 4.5in midrange driver—the most important noisemaker in any speaker system. The diaphragm consists of two cones bonded together but sandwiching nothing more than an air gap; the result is increased rigidity and no cone break-up, with no weight penalty. In practice, it means greater midband speed and clarity, lightning-quick transient recovery and dipole-like transparency. This diaphragm is fitted to a heavy cast magnesium frame, while the motor consists of a large magnet and a short voice coil with a long gap. A phase plug is fitted to the centre of the cone for even greater response uniformity.

The midrange driver is fitted just above the midpoint of the sloped and sculpted baffle, the latter a Thiel trademark. Above it is the 1in metal dome tweeter seen in other Thiel speakers, while the bottom of the baffle contains a 10in woofer with an aluminum diaphragm. Above the woofer is a passive radiator made of sandwich construction.

Thiel is well-known for complex crossovers, so the '3.6 features a 25-element, first-order device incorporating custom-made polystyrene capacitors and air-core inductors while the wiring is made from low-oxygen copper. The terminals are fitted to the underside of the cabinet: a single pair, as Thiel doesn't see the need for bi-wiring when a properly designed crossover is in use.

As ever, the cabinet is heavy and bomb-proof, braced with five cross-pieces; the midrange driver has its own internal enclosure. The shaped, sloped baffle positions the drivers for time alignment, and it's free of edges which could cause diffraction. The black grille



– so carefully chosen that its removal isn't necessary under 'audiophile' conditions – is wrapped around a solid frame and the snug fit provides shape to the grille as it mates with the baffle. The review pair arrived in the amberwood finish which I've grown to loathe. It's one of those orange-y, heavily-grained woods which gives me eye-ache; but I almost feel guilty criticizing it having seen how Thiel builds its cabinets. It makes me think of German car-makers' attempts at producing Jaguar-calibre wooden dashes: the wood is so perfectly finished that it looked like it was grown in a DuPont laboratory rather than a forest. (This is a wholly personal view and not to be taken too seriously as I'm also known to hate cricket, classical music and other refined pursuits.)

A small footprint is the neatest trick in the book: the Thiel salesperson will tell you that the '3.6 requires floorspace of only 12.5 x 17in/32 x 43cm (w x d). But the Thiel stands 48.5in/123cm tall, so it won't disappear in any room smaller than, say, the Number 1 court at Wimbledon. But the boxes are boxes, no matter what you do to them, so forget any speaker of this size if you're into camouflaged hardware. But they are slim and beautifully made, so I suppose I could learn to love 'em in a different veneer. Balsa, petrified – anything but amberwood...

SOUND QUALITY

Lord knows, the sound is about as seductive as it gets, a real Southern Belle without the ringing. This speaker is about as smooth as a shot of Jim Beam Black Label, and as easy to enjoy. Positioning? The CS3.6 is so *unfussy* that I was wondering how all of the other high-end makers could get away with the positioning to the millimetre. (Then again, they'd argue that you can't design a successful product unless you specify how it is to be used.) Still, it's delightful to play with a high-performance speaker which requires no painstaking toe-in and which responds enthusiastically to cable changes and variations in the proximity to the walls. And, as Thiel provides three spikes, you don't have to worry about levelling the '3.6 or supplying suitable footwear.

What you must provide, though, is a near-state-of-the-art system because the Thiel will let you in on all sorts of things you didn't know your system was doing.

At 86dB/1W sensitivity and a hardly frightening 40hm impedance (not dropping below 3ohm), the Thiel could be driven with a small Adcom or Acurus amplifier to obscene levels, but let's face it; at £3595 [\$5900 U.S.] per pair,

you'd expect the owner to budget a wee bit more than £500 [\$825 U.S.] for amps. So I turned to the all-Krell system for the bulk of the listening period, with a few hours of Beard-power for comparison purposes. Wiring consisted of Mandrake balanced cables, with NBS digital coaxial and the thinner of the two XLO speaker cables. And, with all the bass energy extractable from the Thiels, it's bass control which you'll require of the rest of the system.

Suffice it to say that the Krell MDA-300s are the best I've ever used in my system commanding lower octaves. At no time and under no circumstances – passive woofer effects included – did the Thiels sound lumpy or one-note, despite delivering copious amounts of bass in my listening room. The synergy between the Krell and Thiel was impossible to fault. And the bass section did everything it should beyond merely reproducing the notes. The weight was convincing – my fave rave from Sousa on Test Disc 2 made me think of the corny parades I witnessed as a kid in the States. I could almost taste the cotton candy and smell the politicians.

On rap swill, it was the good ol' fist-in-the-chest effect, the speakers moving a lot of air but not letting it eddy into clouds. But the real skill came in the transitions, from thunderous passages to near silence. If you want to hear what a system sounds like when it's free of overhang, the Thiel/Krell pairing is a textbook example.

THIEL TWEETER

Before delving into the wonders of the twin-skin midrange, a word about Thiel's use of metal dome tweeters. Leaving aside the Celestion SL-series, which (despite being among the first-ever metal dome systems) sound nothing like speakers with metal domes, in the '3.6 Thiel has achieved a balance I've heard only rarely.

There is, simply, no tell-tale 'spit' or sizzle to indicate the presence of a metal tweeter. Even CDs from the vaults with pre-Dolby hiss sounded smooth and silky. Maybe the snake simulation is only important in budget designs, where retailers try to dazzle punters with £100 speakers which 'sound like hi-fi'.

But the midband is the important bit, like the heart of a fillet mignon. Thiel's cautious, sane approach – the refinement of known techniques – has produced a speaker with clarity, transparency and admirably superb imaging. However crude and mechanical it is (in these days of digital correction) to use a sloped baffle for time alignment; however trivial the

shaving of the baffles' edges may seem; however obvious the overkill cabinet bracing, it's all good, reliable stuff, and the combination works. Twin-cone midband aside, there's little about the Thiels that's unusual. What's impressive is how all of the elements work together. And the midband is the give-away.

As far as my tastes are concerned, the toughest tests are acoustic piano and vocals. With some luscious ragtime, some purist recordings of Dr John, my pet Patsy Cline tear-jerkers, a Persuasions disc or three, *Tennessee Ernie Ford's Greatest Hits* and anything else audiophiles detest, I heard all that I could want: lifelike reproduction with convincing dynamics and minimal coloration.

With the best sources, it was possible (eyes closed, of course) to sense true 3D dimensions to the performers and an eerily convincing sensation of space. The only weakness the Thiels showed in this area involved the edges of the soundstage. The Thiels delivered very little beyond their outer borders, standing there like the sides of a picture frame to the left and right of the musical event. To ameliorate this condition, I would advise you to set them as far apart as possible, just before the onset of a 'hole in the middle'. As all of the action occurs in between these speakers, it's easy to discern the point of too much spread. The sound loses its solidity, not unlike wiring speakers out of phase.

If there's anything fallible about the Thiels, it's the Aw-shucks-yes-ma'am-mah-name-is-Elvis politeness. I kid you not: if ever a product sounded like its birthplace, it's this south-of-the-Mason-line speaker. Would that it could let out a Rebel Yell. Instead, it always sounds 'nice', however revealing it may be of system nasties. Rather than irritate, these 'exposed weaknesses' in your hi-fi chain merely intrude, and that's because they're rendered easily identifiable. In a lesser system, they'd be exacerbated.

Which is a nice way of saying that the Thiels won't necessarily drive you into the immediate upgrading of the rest of your system. You'll merely learn how to focus on the good stuff and ignore the rest, like the seeds in a watermelon. Hell, I've got to get away from this *Dukes of Hazzard* nonsense. The Thiel CS3.6, Southern origins or not, is a thoroughbred (and if that ain't an opening for an equine, bluegrass, Kentucky Derby simile, then what is?). Given the right system, they'll give you chills. And the best cure for chills is a little toddy. Which brings me back to bourbon. Which is a Southern drink. And Southerners are polite. Like the Thiel CS3.6 ♣

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