



## Thiel CS6 loudspeaker

Over the course of the year that Trish and I have lived in our new home, I've been rebuilding my reference system a piece at a time. I've been more or less methodically working through different cable packages and combinations of electronics, experimenting with various racks and isolation systems, even tearing down and rearranging the room layout and treatments a number of times. But the heart of the search was always figuring out what to use as a reference speaker.

On paper, it was easy. I needed something simple, to mate with the broadest possible spectrum of associated gear. It had to be big enough to produce truly full-range performance in my large, open area, but small and attractive enough to earn Trish's blessing. My conscience dictated that it had to represent good value. Ideally, it should be something that *Stereophile's* readers were familiar with. And, of course, it had to sound absolutely fantastic. When I sorted all of the requirements and boundary conditions against my database of experience and auditioning, the answer came up "Thiel."

But which model? First I considered the CS3.6, a high-end classic and a great match for the electronics I typically use... but I was a little concerned about its abili-



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ty to drive my large space. Next I looked at the CS72, which I reviewed in the February 2000 *Stereophile*. The '72 is an incredible performer...but simply too big for the floor space I had to work with. So I arrived, Goldilocks-like, at the CS6. According to my list of criteria, it would be just right.<sup>1</sup>

John Atkinson reviewed the CS6 in the March 1998 *Stereophile* and was favorably impressed: "The CS6's balance was warm, smooth, and grain-free, coupled with excellent low-bass response, pinpoint imaging, good soundstage depth, and superb retrieval of recorded detail."

He also noted that its dynamics were "startlingly natural," and found the CS6 to be very revealing, noting that miking techniques were clearly obvious through the Thiels, and that "differences between CD players and preamplifiers were similarly audible." However, he also took pains to note that these differences were "vividly clear, but the presentation was never upfront or in my face, or 'ruthlessly revealing,' or any of the other descriptors that reviewers use to disguise the fact that the speakers have them leaping up to turn down the volume."

On the minus, or potentially minus, side of the ledger, JA mentioned a couple of logistical limitations and one sonic shortcoming. The former are that the CS6 needs to be mated to a gutsy amp and top-quality associated gear, and that the listening position needs to be at least 10' from the speakers for the drivers to integrate. The sonic shortcoming was a slight midrange reticence: "the midrange didn't offer quite the same degree of ultimate clarity or cleanness that so distinguished the bass or treble octaves."

My experience with the CS6 pretty much mirrored JA's, but I'll add a few comments. The first one, which JA alluded to but didn't elaborate on, is that the Thiels were not trivial to set up. It makes sense—the CS6 is a large speaker and truly drives even my large space, so there are bound to be a lot of room interactions—but it's worth noting nonetheless. I spent many, many hours moving the speakers and my listening chair around before I got their balance

<sup>1</sup> Serial numbers of units reviewed: 1447, 1448. Price: \$7900/pair. Warranty: 10 years. Manufacturer: Thiel Audio, 1026 Nandino Boulevard, Lexington, KY 40511-1207. Tel: (859) 254-9427. Fax: (859) 254-0075. Web: www.thielaudio.com.

## Follow-Up

right. I then spent many additional hours fine-tuning their placement and toe-in, and arraying Echo Busters bass traps, diffusers, and absorbers both behind the speakers and behind my chair, to get an integrated, focused soundstage. Until I got the setup just right, the sonic picture just wasn't coherent—bits and pieces of the orchestra, and even of individual instruments or voices, seemed to be scattered disjointedly around the soundstage.

In my final setup, the CS6s were approximately 32" from the front wall, 55" in from the sides of my space, about 80" apart, and just a smidgen under 12' from my listening position. Like JA, I toed-in the speakers a bit, but not to the point where I sat directly on-axis. I also raised the speakers a couple of inches by extending their spike feet, then setting the spikes on Immedia's SSC footers, which put the tweeter axis an inch or two above my ears. I'm still in the process of working through all of the permutations of associated gear and cables, but both sets of monoblock power amplifiers I've used with the CS6s, the VTL Ichibans (modified for selectable tetrode operation at ~600W) and the Levinson No.20.6 monoblocks, worked superbly.

When I got everything just so, the CS6s sounded absolutely glorious. Even in my open space, they were truly full-range performers. The subterranean synthesized bass lines on Annie Lennox's *Bare* (BMG 65523-2) are visceral in their impact, and seemed to reverberate through the house's bones and framework. And you haven't lived until you've heard Ray Brown's bass lines—"Mistreated but Undefeated Blues," from *Soular Energy* (Concord Jazz CCD-4268), is my favorite exam-

ple—through the CS6s. Similarly, their treble was every bit as excellent as JA had noted: clear, airy, extended out to forever...just amazing.

And some of JA's other points—the CS6s' natural balance and dynamics, pinpoint imaging, and reproduction of detail? Absolutely. The CS6s were incredibly focused and detailed, giving images a solidity and dimensionality that most speakers only hint at. Their dynamics were superb as well, and always perfectly matched to the source material, from the tiniest vocal nuance of a Suzanne Vega, for example, to explosive rim shots or the zero-to-+100dB chops on Rickie Lee Jones' cover of "Under the Boardwalk," from her *Girl at Her Volcano* EP (LP, Warner Bros. 23805-1). Many, many times, the Thiels caught me off guard with their lifelike dynamics and the incredible realism of their images.

The midrange reticence that JA heard, and the suckout that showed up in his measurements, were not things I noticed in my relatively short time

with the CS6s. Their tonal balance was very neutral, their handling of dynamics was even—and superb—from top to bottom. Nor did I hear any of the spatial effects—a recessed center stage, for example—that I typically associate with a midrange-to-upper-midrange suckout. On the other hand, the very first thing I *did* notice about the CS6s was the excellence of their performance at the frequency extremes. Perhaps JA's midrange suckout is something I'll become more aware of with time. Or perhaps it's not as severe or as obvious in my setup as it was in his.

In March 1998, JA concluded: "It may cost \$7900/pair, but the Thiel CS6 offers high perceived value. It is beautifully constructed, well-balanced, and, once set up optimally, with a gutsy amplifier and high-quality sources, sounds simply superb. The CS6 gets an enthusiastic recommendation—it's going to stay in my system a while."

I couldn't agree more.

—Brian Damkroger

### Brian Damkroger's Associated Equipment

**Analog source:** VPI TNT Mk.V-HR turntable-tonearm, Grado Statement cartridge.

**Digital sources:** Burmester 001, Simaudio Moon Eclipse CD players.

**Preamplifier:** VAC CPA1 Mk.III.

**Power amplifiers:** VTL Ichiban & Mark Levinson No.20.6 monoblocks.

**Cables:** Speaker and interconnect: Nirvana S-X Ltd., Audience Au24, Nordost Valhalla, Monster Cable Sigma Retro. AC: Audience PowerChord.

**Accessories:** Finite Elemente Pagoda equipment rack, String Suspension Concepts equipment & loudspeaker feed, Immedia SSC footers; Nordost ECO3 and Diskolution CD-cleaning & treatment fluids; MIT ZCenter & ZSystem power-conditioning & delivery systems; AudioPrism Noise-Sniffer AC line analyzer, QuietLine AC filters; Echo Busters room treatments.

—Brian Damkroger

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## Ultimate Performance Loudspeakers

1026 Nandino Boulevard • Lexington, Kentucky 40511 • USA  
Telephone: 859-254-9427 • Fax: 859-254-0075 • E-mail: mail@thielaudio.com • Web: www.thielaudio.com