

AUDIO REVIEW | Randy Tomlinson

Thiel ViewPoint Plasma TV Loudspeaker

Designer Jim Thiel is pretty much a legend in high-end audio circles. For decades, his floor-standing speakers have been rated at or near the state-of-the-art, even compared with the price-no-object competition. Jim recently focused his speaker design talent and trained ear on building the ultimate plasma TV speakers. Now, it's possible to have both superb aesthetics *and* superb sound in a room where a full surround system isn't an option.

I've stated many times in reviews that plasma monitors usually don't make the best home-theater displays, although they can look very, very good. It seems that many people agree, because in my ISF calibrations I rarely see plasma-based home theaters. Many of my customers have plasma sets, but they're almost always being used as the home's primary display, while a front projector or RPTV occupies the dedicated home-theater room. Plasma displays are popular because they mount on the wall, take up little or no space, have a bright sharp picture that looks great from any angle in a fully lit room, and are cosmetically the best solutions for many spaces. In such circumstances, a surround-sound system with six or more speakers would just add the clutter that plasma is designed to avoid. But how do you get good TV sound with a plasma monitor without multiple speaker boxes or the hassle of multiple in-wall speakers? With the ViewPoints, Thiel has the answer. The ViewPoints are



high-end audio all the way, yet they're custom-made to perfectly match the styling and cosmetics of your particular plasma display, giving true audiophile sound with a totally seamless, integrated appearance.

Features

The ViewPoints may be small and thin, but don't let that fool you.

Dynamite comes in small packages. The custom-built, custom-painted cabinets are extruded from solid pieces of aluminum specially engineered for minimizing vibration and enhancing clarity. A single ultra-low-distortion coaxial/coplanar driver on each side gives uncolored response to the widest possible listening area with perfect time and phase coherence—something multiple drivers could never accomplish in such a configuration. No expense is spared in this driver, which Thiel makes in-house. Even super-powerful neodymium magnets are used. The woofer uses a short voice-coil with a long gap for high power-handling and long excursion. The coaxially mounted tweeter is also capable of extremely high output and is, in fact, the same one used in the CS 7.2, Thiel's most expensive audiophile speaker. Maximum recommended amplifier power is an incredible 400 watts per channel.

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Perhaps the most crucial design aspect that affects loudspeaker performance is the crossover network. Thiel's expertise in crossover design is legendary. You'll simply never get audio engineering like this from a plasma-TV manufacturer. And once again, top-of-the-line parts from the CS 7.2 were used in the ViewPoint crossover.

According to Thiel, his patent-pending combination of mounting the woofer very close and angled to the wall eliminates the wall-reflection cancellation that mars the sonic performance of virtually every other surface-mounted speaker. This is also said to eliminate the need for a separate center-channel speaker. It's important to note that these speakers are designed specifically for wall-mounting and failure to use them mounted flush against a wall will hinder their performance.

Listening Tests

Thiel supplied the ViewPoints custom-made for the excellent Hitachi 42HDT55 plasma set I reviewed in Issue 52. The Hitachi, which continues to impress me, remains on hand for plasma comparisons. Before mounting the ViewPoints next to the Hitachi plasma, I decided to give them a try in my high-end listening room, right in

front of my Magnepan MG 3.6s and driven by my reference 240 watts-per-channel (4 ohms) Class A fully-balanced Sumo Gold power amp, upgraded with the latest and best parts. Of course, with no rear wall for bass reinforcement, I expected the sound to be somewhat thin, particularly in the upper bass region, but I just wanted to see if they had what it takes to sound like a real audiophile speaker. What I heard was impressive clarity, detail, and lack of coloration (from the upper bass on up), with beautiful, delicate highs that were distinctly high end. The soundstage was wide and deep and the speakers disappeared (sonically) nicely. Engaging a Hsu HO1220 subwoofer with Bryston amplification further enhanced the listening experience, and by an order of magnitude. While I'm not ready to sell the Maggies just yet, this was still impressive sound considering that the ViewPoints are a tiny fraction of the Maggies' size and were being used far from the rear wall and totally against their designer's intentions.

With the ViewPoints mounted on the wall next to the Hitachi plasma, the listening experience with all sorts of video sources was outstanding. While low bass was lacking, there was still plenty of "body" to the sound. The upper midrange/lower treble region sounded just a tad elevated,

probably to enhance intelligibility, but it was far from forward and fatiguing. Excellent movie soundtracks (like *Master and Commander—The Far Side of the World*) were done beautifully and with spectacular detail, as you'd expect, but the real surprises came from conventional broadcast and satellite TV programs that always sounded better than I thought they could. One could be easily spoiled by this kind of everyday TV sound.

Keep in mind, though, that while two speakers in a stereo configuration can give you gorgeous, involving sound, they cannot give you the incredible effect of six speakers and Dolby 5.1 surround. You gave that up for aesthetics—remember?

The recommended power amplifier for driving the ViewPoints will vary according to your listening needs. If you never really crank it up, a really good integrated amplifier with 50 watts per channel might be ideal. My 240Wpc (4 ohms) amp actually gave some surprising sound-pressure levels. But since there would be no center speaker or surrounds, I'd avoid A/V receivers and stick to stereo separates. Watching DVDs with no subwoofer will require *considerably* more reserve power, but for even better movie sound, you should look into one of Thiel's new powered SS series sub-

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woofers and passive crossover.

One thing's for sure, though. You don't want to disgrace these speakers by driving them with the amplifiers built into your plasma TV. Either use the TV's line outputs or those on your cable box, satellite box, or DVD player to drive a *good* external amplifier.

Conclusion

Thiel's ViewPoint speakers aren't cheap by any stretch of the imagination, yet, when you understand that they're designed to the highest stan-

dards of a company known for decades as one of the high-end speaker industry's finest, and truly custom-made in both size and finish to perfectly match your particular plasma display, the price suddenly looks realistic. Even without the aesthetics, stunningly beautiful sound with incredible dynamic capability simply can't be had cheaply. Now if you've spent a few thousand bucks for a Gateway plasma, it certainly makes no sense to spend even more than that for two speakers, but if you've got one of the best plasma sets and want the best sound to match, but without the clutter of multiple speaker boxes, the ViewPoints are about as good as money can buy. In this case, highly recommended.

And, as an added plus: With good electronics, they'll sound better playing audio CDs than many "audiophile" speakers. 

Randy Tomlinson is an independent ISF-certified calibrator in the Atlanta area and can be contacted via his Web site at www.advancedtechservice.com.

SPECIFICATIONS

Bandwidth: 60Hz–20Khz \pm 3dB

Sensitivity: 88dB/watt

Impedance: 4 ohms (3 ohms min.)

Rec. Power: 50–400 watts

Size: 8" x 5" (height and color built to order)

MANUFACTURER INFORMATION

THIEL AUDIO

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www.thielaudio.com

Price: \$3980



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