

SOUND & VISION
CERTIFIED and RECOMMENDED

Thiel

PowerPoint 1.2 Ceiling Speaker System

Although “audiophile ceiling-speaker” might seem an oxymoron of the same magnitude as “English cuisine” or “American diplomacy,” that didn’t stop a number of speaker companies from releasing new models at the recent CEDIA show, all claiming high performance. The interest is perfectly understandable: Ceiling speakers are beloved of buyers of whole-house media systems (and airport PA designers) because they require zero floor space and disappear into rooms. However, for several reasons, they usually sound mediocre — frequently downright bad. I’d never heard a good one, until now. Thiel, a small, Lexington, Kentucky high-end maker of long standing and high reputation, has attempted this feat in its PowerPoint 1.2, with results not far from astonishing.

SETUP

Like Alexander with the Gordian knot, Thiel solved its problem with a single sword-stroke, by taking the ceiling-speaker out of the ceiling. The 1.2 (\$1,450 each) is a high-performance, coincident-source 2-way speaker in a contoured, cast-aluminum “pod” that mounts to the ceil-

ing, with the tail near the juncture of a wall. This third-of-a-watermelon enclosure delivers highly rigid and non-resonant behavior. Equally important, it provides fixed foreknowledge of the driver’s location relative to the two primary reflective surfaces, allowing the PowerPoint to optimize sound in ways that traditional ceiling speakers can’t.

I’ll spare readers the acrobatics whereby I affixed three PowerPoints to my ceiling without boring yet more holes into my long-suffering studio: It worked, but somewhere, Rube Goldberg was smiling. Fortunately, a permanent installation requires just two 1/16-inch holes in solid wood, or a pair of fairly small ones using molly bolts (all supplied). My surround-channel ‘Points went, as usual, on high, sidewall shelves, but shimmed up to be flush to the ceiling. The handsome, compact SmartSub SS1 (\$2,900) sat in my established sub location, just left of the front-left channel.

At Thiel’s urging I eschewed the crossover circuit in my processor for their own PX 05 passive crossover (\$500). This small, nicely finished component is supplied custom-tuned to your particular Thiel models, accepting speaker-level sig-

nals from all five channels and summing their bass content to a single subwoofer output.

MUSIC PERFORMANCE

This was one of those sessions where I turn things on for the first time and inwardly go, “Whoa!” Running the Thiels in full-range stereo (no subwoofer), the sound I first heard was so unexpectedly full, and seemed to originate so far below the physical ceiling, that I actually checked to make sure my regular stand-mounted 2-ways were not still somehow connected. From my listening position some 10 feet from the front wall, the PowerPoints’ stereo soundstage seemed to hover a good 2 feet below ceiling height, perhaps a foot and a half above the top edge of my 50-inch screen’s top edge. (This proved plenty close enough for movie viewing/listening.)

Sound was open, clean, and well



The Short Form

Snapshot

A no-brainer if you demand serious performance from a ceiling-mounted speaker and have plenty of budget.

Plus

- ⚡ Unique sound quality for ceiling speaker.
- ⚡ Surprising bass extension.
- ⚡ Unexpectedly natural imaging.

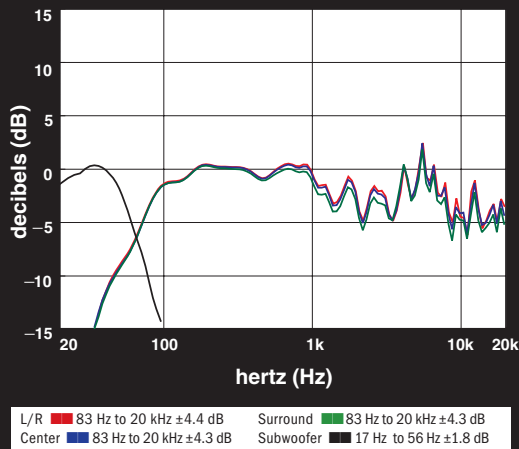
Minus

- ⚡ Jetsonian look won’t please all.
- ⚡ Slightly elevated sonic image.
- ⚡ Sub volume limit falls short of speakers’.

Price \$10,750 (AS TESTED)

Test Bench

Full lab results at soundandvisionmag.com/thiel



The PowerPoint 1.2 has uniform directivity and near identical response for all channel positions. The trace shows a moderate depression between 1 kHz and 3.5 kHz and roughness above 1 kHz. Nominal impedance was just 3 ohms, so use an appropriate amp. The SS1 sub was measured with its PX05 passive crossover. It showed limited upper bandwidth, though the side and rear wall compensation settings extend its range somewhat. — *Tom Nousaine*

defined, with none of the hyped 80-Hz octave by which many small speakers hope to fool the ear into perceiving more bass than is really there. Bass was smooth and controlled, but clearly beginning to roll off fairly quickly below that point. However, in my setup, the Thiels also initially produced a modest surfeit of output in the next, upper-bass/lowest midrange octave, lending deeper male vocals a touch of an over-full, extra-warm tonality. (This seemed to diminish slightly after some hours of playback; perhaps a breaking-in of some sort.) Either way, I suspect much of this arose from ceiling-to-wall, boundary-effect reinforcement. Had I spaced my PowerPoints' "tails" a couple feet from the wall instead of about 6 inches (I couldn't, due to my temporary setup's mechanics), I suspect this might have been much mitigated. When I later tried the system "upside-down" on the floor some 18 inches farther from the wall, it was.

Treble seemed a bit warm at first as well — a factor that also improved slightly with a dozen or so hours, so I left the system playing overnight a couple of nights at moderate volume, which did in fact appear to continue the process somewhat. A little unexpectedly, I found that on-axis listening really made a difference here: If I moved more than about 20 degrees off center, front-to-back, by line of sight to the tweeters, treble definitely "darkened" and the Thiels lost a bit of sparkle and air.

But I don't mean to pick nits, because really, the PowerPoint 1.2's musical abilities were quite remarkable. The Thiels' tonal balance through the critical midrange was essentially perfect, yielding consistently uncolored, natural-sounding voices and instruments, while their smooth extension into the treble regions delivered obvious detail and depth. In my setup, the PowerPoints projected a very cohesive soundstage that seemed distinctly to wrap around toward the sides of the listening area: shallower in the center, but quite deep and out-from-the-wall toward either side.

Adding the sub immediately produced near-perfect bass integration and impressive extension. A PBS-HD Great Performances concert of the Vienna Philharmonic celebrating Mozart's 250th birthday (in quite fine Dolby Digital 5.1) provided very believable extended sound from the small-section basses and cellos, with no hint of "hand-off," bloat, or response-gaps between sub and sats. Bigger bass music proved the SS1 goes plenty deep, and holds its own up to moderately kickin' levels: Pressed hard, the woofer didn't clack or snort, but distinctly stopped getting louder, which I take to be well-implemented limiting circuitry at work.

MOVIE PERFORMANCE

Performance on film sound was also unexpectedly high-end, "for a ceiling speaker."

With the psychoacoustic aid of a video image to "anchor" the sound, I had a hard time noticing that the sonic image was slightly above the screen; only when I turned off the TV did the sonic image seem to mysteriously shift upward a couple of feet. Front-stage cohesion was extremely good — not surprising, given the Thiels' coincident-driver design. When troop trucks and tanks moved across the screen in *The Great Raid*, the smoothness and stability of their accompanying roars, rattles, and whooshes were impressive. (Sounds panning extreme left or right do seem to move up a bit as well, but again, you simply don't notice this unless forced.)

As with music, the SS1 proved a stellar small woofer, with surprising low-end potential well below 30 Hz. Favorite deep-bass effects such as the sliding stone door early in *Stargate* reproduced with all their foundations intact, though as I increased the system volume, the Thiel sub fell well shy of first-run-cinema reference-level performance. This should be an excellent sub for smaller rooms and/or systems where higher-volume playback isn't necessary.

BOTTOM LINE

Thiel's PowerPoint 1.2 delivers truly elevated performance (ouch!). At \$1,450 per speaker, it's obvious overkill for casual multiroom applications. But where serious audio reproduction is desired and ceiling speakers are the only acceptable option, demanding (and well-funded) listeners will find these an impressive and highly livable solution. Under those conditions, I recommend them enthusiastically. **S&V**

Key Features

PowerPoint 1.2

:: (\$1,450 each): 6¼-in woofer with coaxially mounted 1-in dome tweeter, 6¼-in high, 21 in deep; 10 lb

SmartSub SS1

:: (\$2,900; \$3,000 as shown with amberwood finish): 10-in driver; 500-watt RMS amp; 20 x 10¼ x 15 in; 65 lb

:: Finish: PowerPoint 1.2: paintable matte-white aluminum; Subwoofer: satin-black or optional wood veneers

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