

January 2009

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THIEL SCS4 Monitors With SS1 SmartSub Subwoofer

A beautiful combination that achieves outstanding realism.

Review By Brett Rudolph

Micah Sheveloff and I have known each other for several years, as we have spoken at trade shows and discussed ideas about various projects from companies he has represented. One of these projects was THIEL's coming to market with an affordable loudspeaker that would be at home in not only the most elaborate listening environment, but also the more affordable home theater setting. Of course, while the idea was one that offered a great deal of excitement, it was not something that came to pass overnight.

After what seemed like an eternity, last spring Micah gave me the heads up that THIEL had indeed come to market with just such a speaker and I jumped at the chance to do a thorough review. On the outside, this might seem like a fairly easy undertaking. After all, over the years, the number of loudspeakers and equipment I have reviewed is fairly impressive. What made this review different is the sheer number of configurations and possibilities that the THIEL offering represented.

THIEL Products

The THIEL SCS4 is somewhat unique in the company's line up. It is a two-way bookshelf loudspeaker that offers a 6.5-inch woofer coaxially mounted with a 1-inch tweeter. The result is a configuration that can be used throughout a home theater or stereo environment, without having to worry about the orientation of the speaker. This becomes exceedingly important when you consider how many different ways today's home theaters are designed and how much area can be dedicated to speakers within the room. The other major difference between the SCS4 and other THIEL speakers is that it was made off-shore. This is the first product from THIEL that was not manufactured in the United States. Although many companies are now manufacturing their products overseas to take advantage of the cost savings, which translate into affordable products, THIEL has not taken this route. In fact, one of the reasons that the loudspeaker took so long to come to market was their quality control and overall standards forced them to redefine how these speakers were made.



The second loudspeaker which made up this review system was the SS1 SmartSub™ subwoofer. The SS1 is THIEL's "entry-level" subwoofer. It features one 10-inch woofer powered by a 500 watt Class AB amplifier. It should be noted that although it is "entry-level" in their product offering in the subwoofer category, it is by no means an entry level product. At \$2900, the SmartSub™ is certainly neither inexpensive nor entry-level in anything but the fact that it is the smallest of the THIEL subwoofers.

The final component in the THIEL speaker system for this review was the PX05 Passive Crossover. This 5-channel crossover allows the consumer to connect the SmartSub™ and the speakers together regardless whether the preamplifier has crossover capabilities. It becomes even more important when you consider some of the configurations available when you utilize these speakers in a 5-channel or even 7-channel setup for either home theater, SACD or DVD-Audio playback.

Setup Considerations

As mentioned earlier, placement of the SCS4 loudspeakers was easy. They are exceedingly forgiving when it comes to their location. While they may sound better when not against a wall or buried in a bookshelf, their sound did not appear to degrade that much even when they were placed in some of the most precarious positions. The only thing that seemed to make a serious difference was the rigidity what supported them. It appeared that the best way to mount these loudspeakers or at least place them on a very sturdy stand or a stable mounting bracket. These loudspeakers tended to vibrate at higher volumes and with material containing higher levels of bass as would be expected. Of note is that this vibration did tend to cause a noticeable change in the quality of the loudspeaker's performance.

The SS1 SmartSubs did not appear to suffer from any of the same placement issues. In addition, on the back of the subwoofer are controls to tailor the unit's output in order to negate any problems with wall or corner placement. The controls on the back also include adjustments for the volume level. While the SmartSub™ was used as part of the overall loudspeaker system, it certainly could be used by itself without even the slightest apprehension.

The final part making up this THIEL loudspeaker system, as mentioned earlier, was the PX05 passive crossover. This component made the entire review more exciting and slightly more difficult to setup, yet not overly so. The idea of the passive crossover in this type of system is to allow all the loudspeakers to function together in a synergistic way, which transcends most preamplifier's abilities to deal with issues such as bass management. When you utilize the PX05, you make this multi-loudspeaker setup into more like a single 'large' loudspeaker. As such, you rely on the PX05 for presenting a smoother and more controlled load on your other electronics.

The PX05 is fairly straight forward to connect. The company recommends that you run loudspeaker wire from the amplifier to the speaker just as you would do in any setup. However, they also tell you to run a second wire from the amplifier to the PX05. In this way the PX05 is receiving the same signal that the speakers are and can then decide how to best utilize the subwoofer.

Another thing that you need to be aware of is that the PX05 only has the ability to connect five loudspeakers to it. Therefore if you have a large loudspeaker configuration, you are going to either have to only connect five loudspeakers or you are going to require another PX05 and another SmartSub™. In the case of this review the company provided two PX05s and two SS1s, so this was not a problem.

One interesting thing to note at this point is that the company says that you should use the least expensive loudspeaker wire to connect the PX05 to the amplifier. This seemed somewhat strange to me since I have always been a strong proponent of better quality interconnects and loudspeaker wires because I have always found that they offer increased performance. However, no matter how I tried, and I did, I couldn't really find much difference between the various types of connection wires run. Although, one thing that I would strongly recommend is using either spade connectors, or at least being extremely careful of using bare wire because it is very easy to have the connections to both terminals touch and thus short out.

The Setup Finally

You would think that with all the setup considerations, that setting up the entire system would be somewhat time consuming and difficult. However, nothing could be further from the reality of the experience. Once the loudspeakers are in place and the settings on the subwoofers tweaked to represent the placement of the units, the last thing to do is connect the passive crossovers. Although this step can be somewhat tedious, especially if you don't have a great deal of room, it isn't all that difficult. One pair of loudspeaker wires are run from the amplifier to one channel of the passive crossover. Once this is completed, then a balanced cable is run from the crossover to the SmartSub™ itself. The only thing you really need to be cognizant of is that you have a sufficiently long cable to run between the passive crossover and the subwoofer itself.

The other connection that needs to be made is from the preamplifier to the SmartSub™ if you are using a preamplifier that either has a crossover included in it or a component that allows for a LFE (Low Effects Channel). This is done by connecting the output of the component into the rear of the subwoofer. If, as in the case of this review, you are utilizing more than one subwoofer, you will need to run a cable to connect the one SmartSub™ to another. Thus, allowing the signal to pass between the speakers. Once again the only thing you need to be aware of is that you have a sufficiently long cable.

Once you have everything all connected, and this might take slightly longer than what you might expect if you have worked with other systems, the next step is to let the loudspeakers break in. In the case of this review, I found that these THIEL loudspeakers really needed a fairly lengthy break in period for maximum performance. It took around 300 hours until everything really sounded consistent.

Stereo Sound

Well, once all the fanfare and excitement of setting up the system was over it was time to really sit down and see what kind of sound these loudspeakers were able to produce. Since there were a great deal of possibilities, the first one I chose was traditional stereo. Although the evaluation consisted of a large number of music selections for the purpose of this review it has been shortened to a few substantially. Jazz tends to be one of the most difficult types of music for loudspeakers to reproduce. This seems to be especially true of mini-monitors or bookshelf loudspeakers, since they tend to have a more limited range of frequencies they are able to reproduce effectively and realistically. THIEL's SCS4 loudspeakers claim to have a range from 47 Hz to 20 kHz, which is fairly full range, although it does tend to be somewhat meager in the bass range.



The selection that was jazz was *Billy Taylor & Gerry Mulligan, Live at MCG* on the MCG Jazz Record Label. This album has a fairly nice selection of songs which tend to capture some of the best of the heart and soul of Jazz itself. While it's true the recording itself is certainly not of reference grade, nevertheless, the sound is extremely enjoyable, lifelike and entertaining. On "Stompin' At The Savoy", the first track on this album, the sound were extremely detailed. There appeared a complex tapestry of rhythms and musical notes that blended well to create the feeling of being front and center in a very lively hall. The complexities of the music itself did not seem to be degraded anywhere in the evaluation. Although there were times when one might have wished there was perhaps a tad more full range, it certainly was overshadowed by the realism.

Another thing that caught my attention while listening to this recording was the fact that there was no loss of bass, even at the lower frequency levels. I would have thought that because of the limits of the speakers themselves it would be fairly easy to determine where the speakers stopped and the subwoofers picked up, but this was not the case. It seemed as though the subwoofers were doing nothing and the speakers everything.

In order to determine if this was indeed a fact, I played the CD a second time, only this time I turned off the two SS1 SmartSubs. While I will say that the loudspeakers still did an admirable job of reproducing the material, there was certainly a great deal of information missing. The depth of the instruments seemed to be diminished plus the quality of the reproduction, while not compromised, certainly degraded to some degree without the lowermost frequency support.

The second recording that was used in evaluating was the speaker system was an old favorite *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd. It is true that I tend to use this particular CD in my reviews because I think it has many of the components that personally make music satisfying to me. However, in this case I had a two-fold reason for choosing this particular selection. The first was that it gives a great indication of the integration of various wavelengths and the second is that it not only contains a standard CD recording, but an SACD stereo and multi-channel recording as well.

Beginning with the standard CD version of the CD, one has only to close their eyes to experience the holographic emersion that only the best speakers systems make possible. The opening track "Breathe", in the beginning where the only thing that can be heard is the almost tangible beating of a heart, the system itself was able to render the sound to the point where before you could even make out what the sound was, you could feel it. This is a testament to the abilities of the SS1 SmartSubs and the PX05 crossovers. The last time I heard anything even similar was with the Infinity IRS series which had a set of tower subwoofers. Luckily, the speaker system's abilities only became more apparent after the opening bars. By the end of the selection it was easy to see that the pinpoint accuracy of the loudspeakers coupled with their ability to handle even complex passages set them apart from many other speakers in the same price range. The best example of this was on another track, "Money" from the same album.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the best reasons to use *Dark Side of the Moon* as a reviewing tool is that it contains more than one version of the recording. While *Money* was pretty amazing on the standard CD layer, what really impressed me was when I switched from this version to the SACD version. This version is a somewhat higher fidelity recording since it is presented in a format that allows for a greater range of frequencies and sometimes better editing tools. The selection starts with money being pushed from one side of the room to the other. When you listen to this on a set of headphones it feels as though it is moving from one ear to the other, passing through your brain without doing any lasting damage. Well, at least unless you happen to have to volume turned way too high and this sometimes is the case. Anyway, that same sort of visceral impact that you get from headphones can be felt from stereo speakers when listening to it with this system. In fact, in a way it is even more realistic and enjoyable because the overall dimensions of the room only serve to make things more awe inspiring.

Multi-Channel Sound

One of the newest additions to the plethora of playback options is multi-channel sound. This can be utilized for both music and/or movies, however, the requirements and the overall performance of the system tends to change depending on the type of playback you want. Although both are definitely sometimes difficult in their own way, because home theater tends to have a somewhat different audience with a different set of needs and wants, the tools that are available to them are somewhat more substantial. Unlike home theater, surround sound recordings such as those found on SACDs often have problems with bass management and speaker placement that is not quite as much a problem with home theater.

The THIEL system does a great job with multi-channel sound. The fact that all the loudspeakers are identical makes the setup for this type of configuration a breeze. You don't need to worry about one loudspeaker being more full-range or somehow overpowering another, unless that is the way that the recording was mixed. While bass management is sometimes a problem, especially in some of the more expensive or older components, the PX05, takes care of this issue by managing the bass the same way it does stereo sound. It's crossover diverts the correct frequencies to the correct speaker so there are no noticeable holes in the reproduction of the material.

Once again on *Dark Side of the Moon*, on "Us and Them" the multi-channel reproduction is almost eerie in how realistic and holographic it sounds. The sound comes from all the right places to create a setting of overwhelming experience and satisfaction. You can almost imagine feeling the artist's true meaning while drifting into your own world carried by the sounds of the music.

A second recording that was used during the evaluation of the speaker system was *Beethoven: Symphonies No. 3 & 8* directed by Kurt Masur on Pentatone Records. This recording was recorded with the sole intention of being played back in a multi-channel environment. The microphone placement was setup so that the speakers could reproduce the sounds at various places in the recording venue allowing the listener to experience the music as it would have been if they were attending the live performance. The overall sound reproduction quality was spectacular. The timbre of the reproduction was nearly dead on and the acoustics of the recording were impeccable. While the loudspeakers tended to be a tad lean individually, which would be expected since they are not as full range as a floor standing speaker designed for this type of music, together they were amazing. Once again the music was exceedingly engaging and enveloping without being overpowering or distracting.

While there was a great deal of evaluation in the area of multi-channel music with this loudspeaker system, the overall impression was similar. They were certainly great performers, worthy of honorable mentions on their own. However, together in a multi-channel environment with the subwoofers and the passive crossovers, the result was nothing short of spectacular. The system is certainly worthy of a trial in even the most discriminating person's home.

Home Theater

Enjoy the Music.com does not normally work with home theater enthusiasts, as they generally focus on two-channel high-end audio. However, this review would be totally remiss if it did not at least give some impressions as to the speaker system's abilities in the home theater environment. After doing all the audio evaluation, I turned to my fairly large collection of DVDs to see which movies I could use to seriously test the capabilities of this system. The first one was *The Fifth Element* with Bruce Willis.

The Fifth Element is now a few years old and yet it still contains some of the most complex scenes that have been included in a movie since they started putting out DVDs. The one scene in particular I am referring to is when Bruce Willis is sitting in the audience listening to a performance by an alien diva. Her arias are extremely lifelike and nearly breathtaking, but these combined with the actions of other characters during the chapter make it extremely challenging to the entire playback system. The control the THIEL system exerted on the material was mind boggling. The music and scenes came to life and I could hear more detail in more places than I ever knew existed in the movie. In fact, there were conversations that until hearing it with this system I didn't even know existed.

A second movie which I used to put the speaker system to the test, so to speak was *Top Gun*. The opening chapter where the fighter jets are taking off from the aircraft carrier is not only loud, but tends to involve not only special effects, but ultimately conversations and musical accompaniment. On most systems at least some of the detail tends to be over shadows by another, depending on the slant that the speaker designers take. However, with the THIEL system, nothing seemed to take a backseat to anything else. In fact, it was probably the most enjoyable and exciting viewing of *Top Gun* I have ever had.

Summary

This is one of the few reviews where it is actually hard to find something that does not seem to be nearly perfect. This THIEL loudspeaker system formed a synergy that I have not heard in nearly all the time I have been reviewing. That is certainly not said lightly. The sheer realism and beauty of their reproduction on both difficult and easy material is nothing short of amazing. This system overall is really a reviewer's dream for a wonderfully sounding loudspeaker system. While I would love to see THIEL make a floor standing version of the SCS4 and perhaps a 7-channel version of the PX05, this would not influence my decision if I were given the opportunity to use this permanently.



This is one system that I would have absolutely no qualms about recommending to anyone looking for one of the best overall audio playback systems. In terms of home theater, there have not been many systems that I think compare to this one and those are at definitely substantially more expensive. The THIEL system is certainly not the least expensive on the market, but it is absolutely one of the best.

Specifications

SCS4 Speakers

Tweeter: 1-inch aluminum dome, 64 g (2.3 oz) neodymium magnets, copper pole sleeve, short coil/ log gap design with 3 mm Xmax, coincidentally mounted with woofer
Woofer: 6.5-inch aluminum cone; cast frame; 1.7-inch diameter voice coil; Short coil/long gap motor system; linear travel 3/16-inch pk-pk; 7.7 ounce neodymium magnet; copper pole sleeve.
Frequency Response: 48 Hz to 20 kHz (± 2 dB)
Phase Response: minimum $\pm 10^\circ$
Sensitivity: 87dB/W/m
Impedance: 4 Ohm (3 Ohm min)
Dimensions: 8.4 x 11.7 x 17.6 (WxDxH in inches)
Weight: 25 lbs.
Price \$990

SS1 Subwoofer

Driver Configuration: One 10-inch woofer
Input Response: 10 Hz to 300 Hz (± 3 dB)
Amplifier Type: Analog, Class AB
Power: 500 watts, RMS
Line Level Input Sensitivity: 1 volt for 120 dB@1m
Acoustic Output: up to 99 dB @ 20 Hz, 106 dB @ 30 Hz
Dimensions: 11 x 15.5 x 20 (WxDxH in inches)
Weight: 55 pounds
Price \$2900

PX05 Crossover

Size: 7 x 6.5 x 2 (WxDxH in inches)
Price \$500

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